“Why do Teenagers Get Tattoos? A Response to Andres Martin” by Sean Barry

My sister has one. My brother has one. I have one. Just take a stroll downtown and you will see how commonplace it is for someone to be decorated with tattoos and hung with piercings. In fact, hundreds of teenagers every day allow themselves to be etched upon or poked into. What’s the cause of this phenomenon? Why do so many teenagers get tattoos?

Dr. Andres Martin has answered this question from a psychiatrist’s perspective in his article “Teenagers and Tattoos,” published in the Journal of the *American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.* Martin advises fellow psychiatrists to think of teenage tattooing as a constructive opportunity for clinicians to understand teenagers better. Martin examines three different reasons that teenagers get tattoos. First, he argues that teenagers establish unique identities by giving them a sense of control over their evolving bodies and over an environment perceived as adverse and domineering. Second, he believes that a tattooed image often symbolized the teen’s relationship to a significant concept or person, making the relationship more visible and re al. Finally, Martin say that because teens are disturbed by modern society’s mobility and fragmentation and because they have an “intense longing for rootedness and stability” (112), the irreversible nature of tattoos may give them a sense of permanence. Martin concludes that tattoos can be a meaningful record of survived teen experiences. Although Martin’s analysis has relevance and some strengths, I think he over-generalizes and over-romanticizes teenage tattooing, causing him to overlook other causes of teenage tattooing such as commercialization and teenagers’ desire to identify with a peer group as well as achieve an individual identity.

Some of Martin’s points seem relevant and realistic and match my own experiences. I agree that teenagers sometimes get tattoos to establish their own identities. When my brother, sister, and I got our tattoos, we were partly asserting our own independence from our parents. Martin’s point about the symbolic significance of a tattoo image also connects with my experiences. A Hawaiian guy in my dorm has a fish tattooed on his back, which he says represents his love of the ocean and the spiritual experience he has when he scuba dives.

Martin, speaking as a psychiatrist to other psychiatrists, also provides psychological insights into the topic of teen tattooing even though this psychological perspective brings some limitations, too. In this scholarly article, Martins’ purpose is to persuade fellow psychiatrists to think of adolescent tattooing in positive rather than judgmental terms. Rather than condemn teenagers for getting tattoos, he argues that the discussion of tattoos can provide useful insights into the needs and behavior of troubled teens (especially males). But this perspective is also a limitation because the teenagers he sees are mostly youths in psychiatric counseling, particularly teens struggling with the absence of or violent loss of a parent and those who have experience with gangs and prison terms. This perspective leads him to overgeneralize. As a psychological study of a specific group of troubled teens, the article is informative. However, it does not apply as well to most teenagers who are getting tattoos today.

Besides overgeneralizing, Martin seems to romanticize teenage tattooing. Why else would a supposedly scientific begin and end with quotations from *Moby Dick*? Martin seems to imply a similarity between today’s teenagers and the sailor hero Ishmael who wandered the seas looking for personal identity. In quoting *Moby Dick*, Martin seems to value tattooing as a suitable way to record their experiences. Every tattoo, for Martin, has deep significance. Thus Martin casts tattooed teens as romantic outcasts, loners, and adventurers like Ishmael.

In contrast to Martin, I believe teens are influenced by the commercial nature of tattooing, which has become big business aimed at their age group. Every movie or television star or beauty queen who sports a tattoo sends the commercial message that tattoos are cool: “A tattoo will help you be successful, sexy, handsome, or attractive, like us.” Tattoo parlors are no longer in dark dives in seedy, dangerous parts of cities, but appear in lively commercial districts; in fact, there are several down the street from the university. Teenagers now buy tattoos the way they buy other consumer items.

Furthermore, Martin doesn’t explore teenagers’ desire not only for originality, but also for peer group acceptance. Tattooing is the “in” thing to do. Tattooing used to be defiant and daring, but now it is popular and more acceptable among teens. I even know a group of sorority women who went together to get tattoos on their ankles. As tattooing has become more mainstreamed, rebels/trendsetters have turned to newer more outrageous practices, such as branding and extreme piercings. Meanwhile tattoos bring middle-of-the-road teens the best of both worlds: a way to show their individuality and simultaneously be accepted by peers.

In sum, Martin’s research is important because it examines psychological responses to teen’s inner conflicts. It offers partial explanations for teens’ attraction to tattoos, and promotes a positive, noncritical attitude toward tattooing. But I think the article is limited by its overgeneralizations based on the psychiatric focus, by its tendency to romanticize tattooing, and by its underemphasis on group belonging and peer pressure. Ten tattooing is more complex than even Martin makes it.