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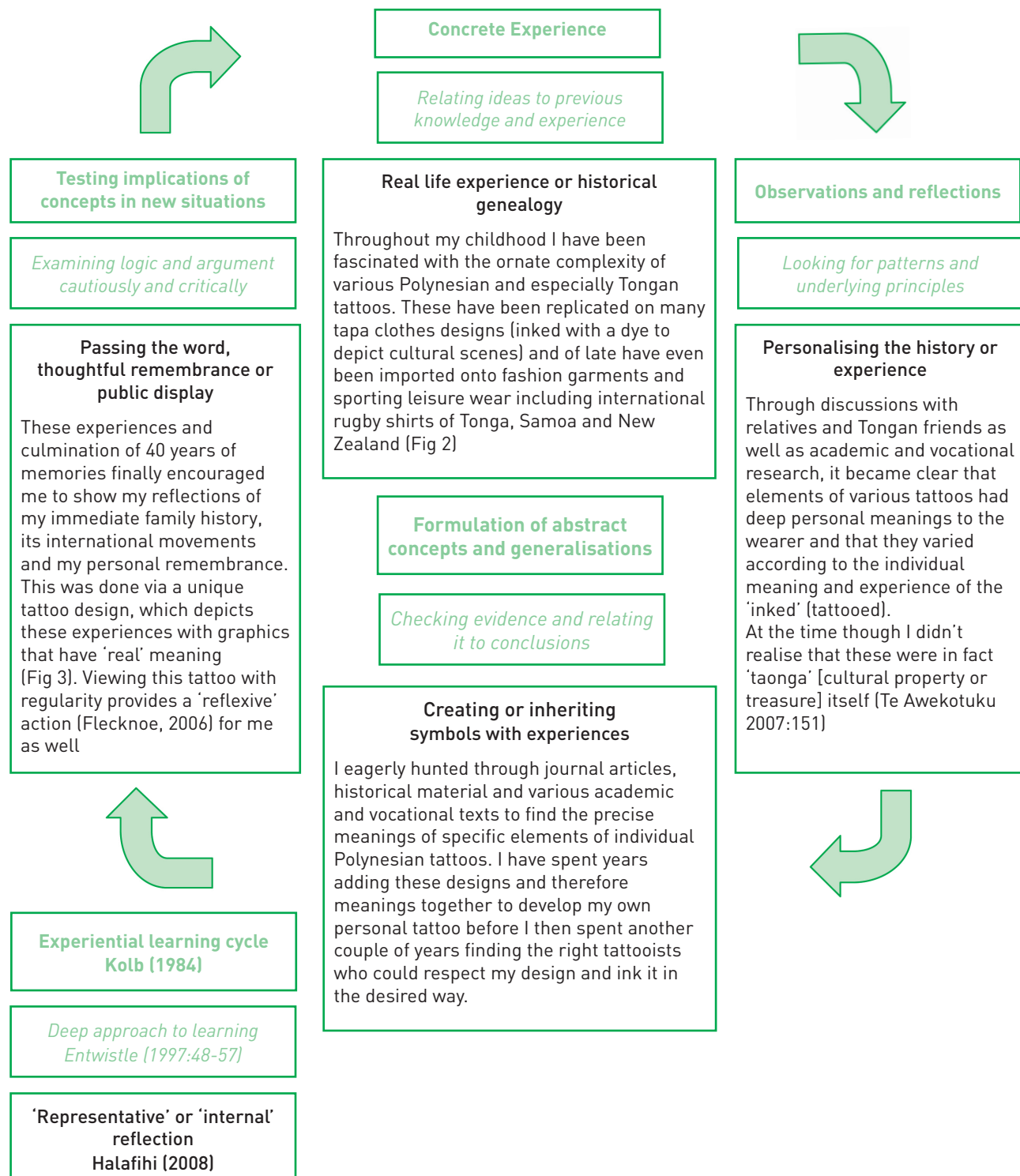
Academic reflections between Polynesian tattooing and reflective practice

Nick Halafihi

These reflections introduce a new reflective practice called 'representative' or 'internal' reflection and the one below outlines my personal journey.

The diagram below is adapted from the reflective cycles of both Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (1984, quoted on Leeds Metropolitan University Skills for Learning website (2010)) and the work of Light and Cox (2006, p. 49) which looks at different approaches to learning such as Entwistle's (1997, pp. 48-57) work.

Fig 1: Reflection 1 (adapted from Kolb (1984) and Entwistle (1997))



The personal reflection shows the connection between the tattoo and a reflective learning process, which is best represented in a diagrammatic fashion.

Figure 2: New Zealand Warriors 'Heritage' Rugby League shirt 2000 (Warriors Merchandise NZ, 2010)



This research validates the thought processes of different cultures (in particular Polynesian culture) in encapsulating their centuries-old cultural tattoos as a form of reflective consideration. The tattoo shown below (Figure 3) may be perceived as a critical reflection, even though there is very little in the way of written words. Reflections, when interwoven with experience (reflecting-in and reflecting-on action) (Schön, 1983), can be used to form a reflective journal. Whichever format the reflection is realised in (written or tattoo), it becomes a valuable learning tool, which may be designed around how the individual learns best (Flecknoe, 2006).

Although many Western civilisations now choose to represent these reflections in a written format and via recent theorist models such as those of Kolb (1984), Gibbs (1988) and Johns (2000, quoted on Leeds Metropolitan University Skills for Learning website [2010]), different cultures reflect these exact same meanings in different ways. One such culture in New Zealand has identified this type of reflective work in its indigenous population. Maoris, like many Polynesian cultures, use tattooing to reflect genealogy, ritual, rank and honour. One such 'ink wearer' (tattooed individual) comments that his tattoo artwork represented "his personal scrapbook" with every tattoo reminding him of "a person, place, time or period of his life" (field notes, 1996, in Velliquette et al, 1998).

In Polynesian culture stories which may be generations old are told via tattoo art: the Tahitian word '*tatu*' or '*ta-tu*' means to strike something and links directly to the ancient art of tattooing to preserve an ancestral lineage and/or record a particular event or story that has been handed down from generation to generation via the same method (Villequette, 1998).

Some scholars such as Gell (1993), and Schrader (2000) and Jones (2000) in Schildkrout (2004), write of tattoos being associated with "subsidiary selves, spirits, ancestors, rulers and victims" that are resident within the tattooed individual, while some write of ethnographic work being inscribed on bodies (Sparkes, 2000, p. 21 and Schildkrout, 2004, p. 322). Auto-ethnographic study (the study of ourselves) is a relatively new field and is often associated with qualitative analysis; as such it has stimulated the author to introduce the term 'internal' reflection. I believe that this may describe a 'personal' or 'internal' reflection that is transmitted to the outside world in the form of a tattoo. Drawing on the work of Sparkes, an auto-ethnography is a narrative of self, although this research offers tattoos as a viable alternative to narrative and suggests that auto-ethnographic tattoos are not only commonplace but that they can also be very real transcripts of the narrative equivalent. Further, this research shows that different cultures reflect in different ways and that the tattoo is a popular and essential method of ethnographic capture (Figure 3).

Some westernised tattoos may hold various deep and meaningful elements to the wearer and without knowing it they are reflecting in or on action. The inked individual regularly revisits this process when catching sight of his or her image or remembering what his or her tattoo looks like and then reflecting in this way on its meaning or relevance to them.

According to Hillier (2005, p.9), this mode of reflective practice is termed 'dispositional reflection' and suggests it is the person's orientation that influences the action, for example his or her preferences, aspirations, feelings and personal reactions to purposive activity. However, Hillier (2005) stops short of making any connection to a diagrammatic format such as a tattoo. The new theory which I have identified ('representative' or 'internal' reflection) is supported by Gröning (1997) who states that cultures can identify themselves with special significance using their skin as the canvas of experimentation.

In this particular case the translations of the Tongan tattoo (Figure 3) include artwork that reflects **strength** [the triangular design, usually representative of a shark's tooth to strike fear into enemies, represented at the top of the tattoo] in a specific situation [in this case the rest of the tattoo]; **new growth/rebirth** [triangular patterns represented in rows down either side of the tattoo]; a **battle** or warlike journey [spearheads cascading from the narcissus flower]; and **'everlasting love'** translated into the Tongan language at the top of the tattoo. I suggest through this study that this type of tattoo may also be akin to an ethnographic story and that the reflective process within its complex design, forethought and imagination displays evidence of an additional form of data capture; Schön (1987) calls this reflecting-in and reflecting-on action.

These types of body modifications (tattoos and other forms of skin decoration utilised by other cultures) are more than a fashion statement to many cultures; they are a way of life. Morningstar (2003) in Heard (2003) goes on to suggest that this practice is a social norm, a social taboo, a statement of the inner self, a culture and a religion. Samoans even believe that every part of you, even your thoughts, should live up to the tattoo you have received (Charting the Pacific, 2005).

If, as Heard (2003) suggests, this practice is a form of self-expression and represents a desire to have a permanent remembrance, then this would also support Flecknoe's (2006) comments on a need to continually review what has been learned and to reflect on how decisions were made; he calls this the 'reflexivity bit' and notes that this is the whole purpose of reflecting and compiling a journal (or in this case a tattoo).

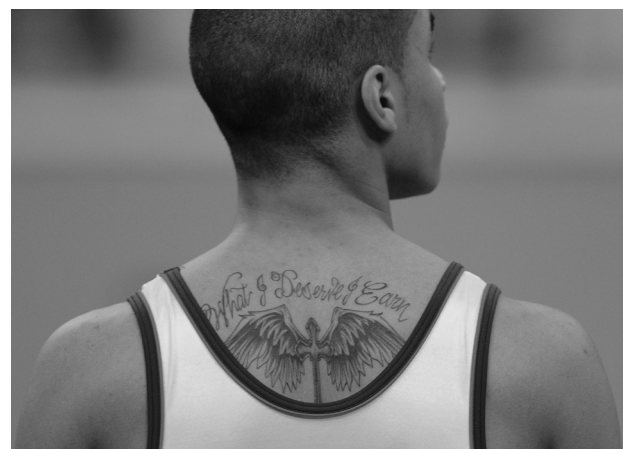
Heard (2003) describes a person's skin being used as a vehicle to express a certain attitude, feeling, desire or inspiration. There are even examples of Western (sporting) role models proudly wearing their living reflection during their chosen sports.

Figure 3: A Tongan reflection in the form of a traditional Polynesian tattoo (Nick Halafihi)



British gymnast Louis Smith's tattoo of an ornate crucifix with wings between the shoulder blades (Figure 4), together with the words "what I deserve I earn" (Guardian, 2008a), may reveal a personal reflection on the hard work that Louis strives to achieve each day in order to be in top physical shape for his sport.

Figure 4: British gymnast Louis Smith with his "what I deserve I earn" tattoo (Tom Jenkins/Guardian News & Media Ltd 2008)



This provides further evidence of a 'representative' or 'internal' reflection, which may have come about via a much simpler method than the ones used by Kolb (1984) and Entwistle (1997). These endorse Broome's (2006) comments that tattooing is an expression of the growing individualism of contemporary society across the world.

Figure 5: Weightlifter Ele Opeloge with her 'malu', a tattoo that symbolises coming of age and respect for one's culture and society (Rungroj Yongrit/EPA, 2008)



The form and meaning of body decoration is always the expression of a particular culture (Gröning, 1997), which suggests that skin decoration and reflective writing are the same but differentiated simply by culture and, significantly, technology. The crucifix with wings for Louis Smith (Figure 4) depicts his journey and sacrifices on his way to the Olympics, whereas in the case of Ele Opeloge, the Samoan weightlifter (Figure 5), her intricate pattern of lines, dots and other tribal markings reflect her coming of age and respect for her culture. Both are equally reflective but neither the same in design nor content, thus reflecting the individuality of the tattoo design. This may also suggest that their reflection structure need not be the same either. Cohen (2000) suggests that tattoos are used by many cultures (including Maori, Japanese and Indonesian) as emblems of accomplishment: in today's society these may also include Olympic rings (representing success) or traditional Polynesian markings (representing family connections, memorials or genealogy).

Moon (2000, p. 223) suggests that we use images and metaphors to represent theories on which we base thinking and action, and in turn they represent a strategy for enhancing everyday learning and provide the vehicle for initiating some kind of reflection.

Reflections deserve to be honoured with enough time and effort for them to make a difference in your life, whether that is in sport, business, academia or the cultural medium you choose to define a key moment in your life. The time to reflect and the regularity of reflection separate a good professional from a poor one (Flecknoe, 2006); many ink wearers in this study get their tattoos to enable them to spend regular time remembering and reflecting at length.

Figure 6: Archer Laurence Godfrey awards himself a new tattoo for each Games he competes in (Jewel Samand/Getty Images, 2008)



Te Awekotuku (2007) describes a similar process as an opportunity for wearers to cement their unique relationship with a ritual or practical matter such as a milestone, a record of an ancestral deed, secret or dream, and it is this internal thought process that suggests that specific forms of tattoos can provide deep and meaningful reflection to the wearer. Moreover, these tattoos can also provide an extended opportunity for reflection which enables the inked individuals to use their tattoo as their own personal expression of how specific decisions have been made – according to Flecknoe (2006) this is the 'reflexivity bit' and it is also the crucial part of Kolb's (1984) "observations and reflections" and Entwistle's (1997) "looking for patterns of underlying principles". According to my own theory of 'personal or internal' reflection (Figure 1) it represents personalising the history or experience.

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