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Regret among tattooed adolescents[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Tattoo regret among adolescents is an important, yet understudied, process. Among the 417 tattooed adolescents in a Colorado school district, one-third express regret. Developmental theory reasons that younger persons consider a tattoo decision more emotionally, anticipate regret less, and regulate regret less effectively; therefore, more of them experience regret. Non-delinquents are more prone to regret stemming from social control via bonding, negative labels and stigma. Higher risk-taking by men explains their generally larger, more controversial, more visible tattoos. These tattoos can conflict more with changes in identity and meaning, as well as evaluations from others, so more men experience regret. Results support these predictions. Findings suggest regret is part of a more mainstream developmental trajectory for tattooed adolescents.

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1. Introduction

Research has shown the positive aspects of tattoos, including expressions of symbolic creativity (Sanders & Vail, 2008; Willis, 1993), meaning-making and identity formation (Huxley & Grogan, 2005; Johnson, 2006; Koch, Roberts, Armstrong, & Owen, 2015) especially among young adults. For adolescents, having a tattoo also is correlated with negative behaviors such as risk-taking, delinquency, substance use and less orientation toward school (Deschesnes, Fines, & Demers, 2006; Dukes & Stein, 2011; Silver, VanEseltine, & Silver, 2009). Recent research shows that 14% of tattooed adults experience regret (Braverman, 2012). Among tattooed college stu-

dents between 12% and 18% regret their tattoo, and about 7% report that they are at least somewhat likely to have a tattoo removed in the future (Braverman, 2012; Greif, Hewitt, & Armstrong, 1999). This estimate increases if in the future tattoo removal were to become only as painful and expensive as the getting of a tattoo. In this case, about 16% of tattooed college students would have a tattoo removed (Dickson, Dukes, Smith, & Strapko, 2012; Laumann & Derick, 2006).

In contrast to the broad scope of findings for adults, little is known about tattoo regret among adolescents, here defined as persons between 11 and 18 years of age. Regret is an “emotion that we experience when realizing or imagining that our present situation would have been better, had we decided differently” (Zeelenberg, 1999, p. 94). Tattoo regret is a type of “prevention failure” that results from not bypassing an undesirable situation (Roese, Summerville, & Fessel, 2007).

In a qualitative study of tattoo regret, Madfis and Arford (2013) find persons can experience regret when they

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acquire a very different, negative meaning of their tattoo, or the connection between their current life and the meaning of the symbol changes. Regret for up to 5% of tattoo recipients also can stem from the dermatological complication of an infected or painful tattoo (Liszewski et al., 2015).

Unlike some other choices, the permanence of tattoos means that tattoo regret usually cannot be regulated by reversing the choice or by undoing the consequences of having ink under the skin (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). Therefore, the present study offers a unique opportunity to examine the process of tattoo regret, one in which a young actor is fully responsible for the outcome, and the undoing of a regretted choice usually is not a practical option.

1.1. Developmental perspective

In a recent study, 35.1% of persons who get their first tattoo before age 18 express regret, but only 12.8% of persons 18 years or older regret their first tattoo (Liszewski et al., 2015). Adolescence is fraught with the susceptibility to intemperate risk-taking as a result of “heightened reactivity to emotions and a still immature ability to self-regulate” (Reniers, Murphy, Lin, Bartolome, & Wood, 2016, p. 1). This shortfall tends to decline with age, as virtually every theory of development posits an increase in competence, responsibility and identity (Berk, 2013). Regret bridges past and future, so it calls attention to the responsibility for a regretful action (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007), and by college age most decisions to get tattoos are carefully considered (Dickson et al., 2012).

1.2. Dual-process framework

The dual-process framework (Sierra, Jillapalli, & Badrinarayanan, 2013) posits that older persons have more complete rationales for getting a tattoo, ones that emphasize both cognitions and emotions. These rationales include the anticipation of possible future regret, a cognitive emotion (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007) that one may turn against their tattoo and come to regret it (Healy, 2009). Elements of the dual-process framework temper the impulse to give the self-gift of a tattoo (Mick & DeMoss, 1990). As expected, anticipated regret of a tattoo negatively influences the intention to get one (Sierra et al., 2013). Rationales for older, more mature persons getting a tattoo can be based on a variety of reasons, including connections to a greater number of significant others who have tattoos (Armstrong, Roberts, Owen, & Koch, 2004; Koch, Roberts, Harms Cannon, Armstrong, & Owen, 2005); more life experiences and role transitions that are worthy of commemoration in a tattoo (Atkinson, 2003) and more identity markers as the self-concept becomes more developed and expresses greater figurative creativity (Bell, 1999; Willis, 1993). These rationales are justifications for tattoo decisions, and they serve to decrease regret (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007).

1.3. Strain and stigma

Agnew (2001, 2012) defines subjective strain as an outcome of relations in which others treat an individual in

ways that are adverse. A tattoo can lead to strain due to labeling and stigma (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963; Lee, Menard, & Bouffard, 2014; Lemert, 1967), as 82% of adults think that adolescents under age 18 should not be allowed to get a tattoo (Braverman, 2012). These older cohorts of persons have fewer tattoos, are less accepting of them and they express greater prejudice against people who are tattooed (Adams, 2009; Bowman, 2010). Even as tattoos have become more prevalent, research continues to show that many people view tattooing as thoughtless and irresponsible (Hawkes, Senn, & Thorn, 2004; Roberts, 2012). Tattooed persons are stereotyped as having a variety of deficits, including poor decision-making skills, vulnerability to negative peer pressure, poor student achievement, drinking problems, promiscuity and other deviant propensities (Armstrong, 1994; Braverman, 2012; Roberts & Ryan, 2002; Swami & Furnham, 2007). Using Goffman’s notion of stigma, tattooed persons can be seen as undesirable, deviant, and perhaps even in possession of a spoiled identity (Goffman, 1963). Victims of stigma often experience discrimination that can lead to strain that is rooted in anxiety and social alienation (Martin & Dula, 2010). These processes are consistent with regret, especially among younger persons.

1.4. Gender

Tattooed women experience less acceptance than tattooed men (Braunberger, 2000; Braverman, 2012; Hawkes et al., 2004), and when women become victims of negative comments and stigma, they are more likely than men to have a tattoo removed (Armstrong et al., 2008). Generally, young women are more risk averse than young men (Reniers et al., 2016), and this well-supported notion can be shown in tattoos. While women tend to have just as many tattoos as men (Horne, Knox, Zusman, & Zusman, 2007), they tend to get smaller tattoos (Liszewski et al., 2015), get them on hidden, private skin and reinforce traditional gender roles by choosing symbols such as flowers or butterflies (Dickson et al., 2012; Horne et al., 2007; Manuel & Sheehan, 2007). The size, placement and gender-consistency (Bussey & Bandura, 1999) of tattoos among women results in fewer others seeing them, and the less controversial symbolism can make tattooed women seem less deviant; thus, they are less likely to become a focus of social control. Furthermore, the traditional symbolism may be less tied to a woman’s current conception of self, so tattoos from an earlier time are less likely to conflict with changes in style or identity. These processes result in less tattoo regret among women.

1.5. Delinquency

In their general theory of crime Gottfredson and Hirschi argue that low self-control is a precursor of criminal behavior (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, p. 90). They characterize individuals with low self-control as impulsive and more likely to take risks, characteristics of persons who get tattoos and who are involved in delinquent acts. In addition, persons with low self-control are seen as short-sighted and less conscious of future consequences. These character-

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