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Comparing the psychosocial health of tattooed and non-tattooed women



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ABSTRACT

Tattooing, particularly for women, has often been considered a marker of psychopathology and deviance. The present study questions this association and hypothesises that tattooed women will be as psychosocially healthy as non-tattooed women, using *generativity* as a measure of psychosocial health. Generativity refers to the physical or ideological legacy that one will leave to future generations, and is theoretically and empirically associated with psychological health and pro-social behaviour. This study employed an internet survey of 710 females (age range 18–69, $M = 26.49$, $SD = 10.11$) and sought to explore: (1) whether there were differences between tattooed and non-tattooed women on generativity as measured by the Loyola Generativity Scale, and (2) whether women with tattoos would evidence the same pattern of significant relationships between generativity and the theoretically and empirically salient variables of age, relationship and parental status, as non-tattooed respondents. Results indicated that tattooed women were just as generative as non-tattooed women. Both groups also evidenced the same patterns of significant relationships between generativity and age, relationship and parental status.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Erikson's theory of generativity

In 1950, Erik Erikson proposed a profoundly new way of understanding human development (de St. Aubin, McAdams, & Kim, 2004). Erikson's eight-stage theory of psychosocial development postulated that as humans age, they progress through a hierarchical series of stage-related conflicts that require resolution of specific tasks (Wang & Viney, 1996). After establishing one's identity and establishing close personal relationships in one's twenties and thirties, the task of middle-life, Erikson proposed, was to avoid *stagnation*, i.e., doing nothing of value, thus leaving the world having made no lasting impression (McAdams & Logan, 2004). According to Erikson, rather than stagnate, one could achieve what he termed *generativity*, which is the 'concern for and commitment to the next generation' (de St. Aubin, 2004, p. 4). Generativity involves shifting the focus from oneself to others, to the positive legacy that one will leave to one's children, community, culture or world. Being generative can take many forms, including being physically or ideologically productive (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992); expression through family or work relationships (MacDermid, Franz, & De Rues, 1998); creating works of art (Evans, 1967) or involvement in charitable, religious or civic activities (Kotre,

1984). Essentially, generative adults may be thought of as 'keepers of the meaning' who seek to pass on culturally contextualised values, skills, traditions and wisdom to those who follow (Vaillant & Milofsky, 1980, p. 1348).

1.2. Generativity and age

Although subsequent theorists have softened Erikson's (1963) original conception of a firmly hierarchical model (McAdams et al., 1992), it is generally accepted that generativity is a task that becomes more salient as one ages (Webster, 2003). Clearly, as life progresses, it becomes self-evident that the time left to live (and potentially leave a legacy) is limited. Additionally, McAdams, Hart, and Maruna (1998) note that social expectations around the expression of generativity increase with age. Further, Thorne and McLean (2002) argue that the actual *ability* to act on generative desires also increases with age, due to discretionary time and income. Accordingly, research across a range of paradigms has evidenced significant positive relationships between age and generativity (Keyes & Ryff, 1998; Peterson & Stewart, 1993; Rossi, 2001; Ryff & Migdal, 1984; Snarey, 1993; Vaillant & Milofsky, 1980).

1.3. Generativity and parental status

Erikson (1963) described parenting as 'the prime generative encounter' (p. 130). Peterson and Klohnen (1995) observed that one's children are the closest possible connection to the next

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generation, offering unequalled generative opportunities to nurture and guide, underpinned by intrinsic psychobiological impulses to reproduce and nurture those who embody “our substance” (Browning, 2004, p. 252) while buoyed by strong social expectations and support around this role (Peterson & Stewart, 1993). Parenting is not only an expression of generativity itself, it stimulates agentic motivations around achievement which prompt further generative acts (Christiansen & Palkovitz, 2007). As Snarey, Kuehne, Son, Hauser, and Vaillant (1987) found, those who were parents were more likely to be responsible for the nurturance and leadership of adults outside their own family. Accordingly, the positive relationship between generativity and parental status is well established (McAdams et al., 1992; Peterson & Stewart, 1993; Snarey, 1993; Snarey et al., 1987).

1.4. Generativity and relationship status

Erikson (1963) theorised that one needed to have successfully negotiated the preceding developmental life stage crisis *intimacy v/s isolation* to be able to devote oneself to generativity. Essentially, through intimate dyadic unions, one resolves inchoate conceptions of reciprocity, sharing and openness, learning what it is to be connected to others, and thus developing the capacity to fully connect to the wider community through generativity. Accordingly, the positive relationship between generativity and close interpersonal relationships is well established (Cheek & Piercy, 2008; Frensch, Pratt, & Norris, 2007; Kotre, 2004; Peterson, 2002; Peterson & Duncan, 2007; Slater, 2003).

1.5. Generativity as a marker of psychosocial health

Erikson (1963) held the position that achieving generativity is predicated on mastering earlier developmental crises and thus, generative people are more likely to possess psychological strengths or ‘virtues’ (Peterson & Klohnen, 1995). Accordingly, generativity has acted as a marker of psychological health, with subsequent research reporting positive associations between generativity and subjective well-being (Ackerman, Zuroff, & Moskowitz, 2000), emotional stability (de St. Aubin & McAdams, 1995), optimised psychological recovery after cancer (Bellizzi, 2004) satisfaction with the process of ageing (Warburton, McLaughlin, & Pinsky, 2006) and a negative association with depression (McAdams et al., 1998). Consistent with their role as ‘norm bearers’, generative adults commit to transmitting normative practices (Peterson & Klohnen, 1995). Accordingly, generativity has been associated with pro-social behaviours such as contributing time and money to family and community projects (Rossi, 2001), volunteering (Snyder & Clary, 2004), environmental stewardship (Warburton & Gooch, 2007) and having a positive parenting style (Peterson, Smirles, & Wentworth, 1997). Indeed, in a study of over 3000 people, generativity was found to be the single strongest and most consistent predictor of multiple pro-social behaviours (Rossi, 2001).

Considering that tattoos have often been considered as markers of psychopathology and deviance (Hawkes, Senn, & Thorn, 2004), and especially so for women (Mifflin, 2013) a connection with generativity as a measure of psychosocial health may seem incongruous, and indeed, to the author’s knowledge, no association between the two has previously been considered. The present study proposes that women’s tattooing, rather than acting as a marker of psychopathology and deviance, represents a culturally situated narrative that documents what is important to be, know, and do, as it has done for thousands of years.

1.6. A brief history of tattooing

Tattooing is defined as ‘the practice of inserting indelible ink into the dermis layer of the skin’ and has been practised for centuries in many different countries, and across diverse cultures (Swami & Harris, 2012, p. 58). Six thousand year old carvings from European archaeological sites depict bodily markings believed to be tattoos (Sanders & Vail, 2008), and evidence of tattooing has been uncovered from archaeological digs in France, Portugal, Romania and Scandinavia, and on mummies from Egypt, Greenland and Chile (Gay & Whittington, 2002).

Tattooing has been identified as the “most ancient method of expressing personal and communal spiritual beliefs” (Hewitt, 1997, p. 67), and strongly so for women, as evidenced in accounts of ancient and indigenous women’s tattooing. Mansfield (1999) writes that in Japan, it was believed that without a delicate *anchi-piri* tattoo around the mouth, a woman’s entry into the afterlife would be barred. Traditionally, Japanese women would tattoo amulets to deter malevolent spirits (Mansfield (1999)) and upon dying, untattooed Fijian women were believed to be attacked by spirits in the afterlife and offered up as food for their Gods (Hambly, 1925). The tattoos of the women of Long Glat in Borneo signified their occupations in the afterlife; those most extensively tattooed allowed to gather pearls from the heavenly river, the partially tattooed permitted only to watch, with the untattooed excluded altogether (Paine, 1979).

For the living too, tattoos conveyed culturally salient, practical information. In ancient Egypt, the primary function of tattooing, believed to be a female-only practice, is thought to have indicated one’s spiritual protector (Paine, 1979). The mummified body of Amunet, an Egyptian priestess of the Goddess Hathor dated 2000BC, displays tattoos thought to have fertility or medicinal functions. Mansfield (1999) writes that traditional Japanese women’s tattoos signified strength and equality with men and, until the beginning of last century, it was common for Japanese female weavers in Okinawa to have the mark of their craft tattooed on their wrists (Sanders & Vail, 2008). The Kayan women of Borneo were tattooed with traditional designs depicting dogs – a culturally endorsed symbol of strength, and women from nomadic tribes in Yemen believed their tattoos protected them from eye diseases (prevalent in that sandy environment) and ensured fertility (Hambly, 1925).

In contemporary indigenous cultures, tattooing often operates as a marker of sexual maturity. In some Papua New Guinean tribes, upon menarche, girls begin a tattooing ritual which extends over a period of approximately three months, the conclusion of which marks the transition from pre-sexual adolescence (*ififi*) to an actively sexual state (*susuki*) (Barker & Tietjen, 1990).

The meaning of tattoos can also change as a result of changing cultural environments. As Barker and Tietjen (1990) observed, the traditional facial tattoos of the Maisin women of northeastern PNG, once firmly anchored within the contexts of puberty rituals and gender, evolved into signifiers of cultural identity as Tufi people in a multicultural society, and a marker of commercial success as indigenous artists as a result of the Maisin’s integration into wider PNG society.

Tattooing was introduced to Western cultures through James Cook’s voyages in the South Pacific in the 1760s and 1770s (Sanders & Vail, 2008). Many of Cook’s crew returned with tattoos, initiating an association between tattoos, sailors and the working class that would last for the next century (Swami & Harris, 2012). Tattooing became fashionable at the end of the 1880s for both sexes of the upper classes in America and Britain, and Fisher (2002) suggests that this uptake stemmed from the wealthy as desirous of imagery that allowed imaginative access to ‘noble savage’ mythology. This period was brief however, due to

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