



Brief research report

Are tattooed adults really more aggressive and rebellious than those without tattoos?



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 July 2015

Received in revised form 7 September 2015

Accepted 9 September 2015

Available online 4 October 2015

Keywords:

Tattoos

Rebelliousness

Aggression

Body art

ABSTRACT

One stereotype of people with tattoos is that they are more aggressive and rebellious than people without tattoos. However, studies examining differences in these traits between tattooed and non-tattooed individuals are dated and have returned equivocal results. To re-examine this issue, we asked 378 adults from London, UK, to complete self-report measures of aggression and rebelliousness, and to report the number of tattoos they possessed. Of this sample, 25.7% possessed at least one tattoo, with no sex difference in the distribution of tattoo status. We found that tattooed adults had significantly higher reactive rebelliousness, anger, and verbal aggression than non-tattooed adults. However, effect sizes were small and there were also no significant between-group differences in terms of proactive rebelliousness, physical aggression, and hostility. These results suggest that, while stereotypes may contain a kernel of truth, they likely present an outmoded picture of tattooed adults.

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Introduction

A common stereotype of people with tattoos is that they are more rebellious and aggressive than their non-tattooed counterparts (Totten, Lipscomb, & Jones, 2009). Historically, tattoos were associated with out-groups, such as bikers or prisoners, who were stereotyped as aggressive. Indeed, some scholars likened tattoos to an “exoskeletal defence” (Hawkins & Popplestone, 1964, p. 500), a symbol of physical strength and aggression. Similarly, the visibility of tattoos in the punk movement of the 1980s is often interpreted as a means of protesting conservative bourgeois values (Swami & Harris, 2012). Despite these suggestions, empirical evidence that tattooed people really are more aggressive or rebellious than non-tattooed people is scant.

In terms of aggression, surveys of adolescents in Serbia ($N=80$; Krasic, Mitic, Kostic, Ilic, & Rankovic, 2011) and Taiwan ($N=9755$; Yen et al., 2012) have reported that those with tattoos have higher self-reported aggression or are more likely to have acted violently

towards others. Studies of patients at English special security hospital (McKerracher & Watson, 1969) and Australian young offenders (Putnins, 2002) have reported that those with tattoos had committed significantly more aggressive crimes or had higher self-reported temper, fighting, and deliberate self-injury. Conversely, a survey of Croatian university students ($N=100$) reported no significant differences in self-reported aggression between tattooed and non-tattooed respondents (Zrno, Frencl, Degmečić, & Požgajin, 2015).

The evidence for an association between tattooing and rebelliousness is even more scant. Verberne (1969) reported that tattooed young offenders were more rebellious than their non-tattooed counterparts. Certainly, rebellion and protest are often cited as motivations for obtaining a tattoo and, historically, tattoos have served as a cultural code for rebelliousness and opposition to convention (DeMello, 2000). On the other hand, Atkinson (2004) argued that stereotypes of tattooing as rebellious are no longer tenable. Far from being a symbol of resistance or rebellion, his interviews with Canadian tattoo enthusiasts led him to conclude that contemporary tattooing reflects compliance to cultural imperatives to engage in body work. Moreover, recent studies have suggested that rebellion is rated poorly as a reason for obtaining a tattoo relative to aesthetic or uniqueness-enhancing motivations (e.g., Swami, 2011; Tiggemann & Golder, 2006; Tiggemann & Hopkins, 2011).

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Aside from being scant, the available evidence on tattoos, aggression, and rebelliousness is also dated. With up to a quarter of the population in post-industrial countries sporting at least one tattoo (e.g., Heywood et al., 2012; Stieger, Pietschnig, Kastner, Voracek, & Swami, 2010), tattoos are now mainstream and transcend earlier sociodemographic boundaries. Emerging evidence suggests that there are few differences in the personality profiles of tattooed and non-tattooed adults, and that any significant differences have negligible effect sizes (Swami, 2012; Swami et al., 2012; Tate & Shelton, 2008). For example, one recent study found that tattooed adults were more impulsive and more willing to take certain risks than non-tattooed adults, but effect sizes were small to negligible (Swami et al., 2016). Given such evidence, a closer examination of tattooing, aggression, and rebelliousness is warranted.

In the present study, we compared differences between tattooed and non-tattooed adults in terms of their self-reported aggression and rebelliousness. While we acknowledge that self-reported data may not necessarily reflect real-world behaviour (e.g., self-reported aggression may not translate into actual aggressive behaviour), they nevertheless provide a useful means of approaching these issues. Based on the available evidence, we predicted that tattooed individuals would report higher aggression and rebelliousness than non-tattooed individuals. However, we also expected that any significant differences would be small.

Method

Participants

Participants were 181 women and 197 men from the general population in Greater London, UK. As per our ethics approval, only respondents of adult age were invited to take part in the study and we further restricted the study to British residents so as to ensure some sampling homogeneity. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 58 years ($M=29.95$, $SD=11.11$). In terms of ethnicity, 73.0% reported as being of British White ancestry, 11.1% of South Asian ancestry, 6.6% of African Caribbean ancestry, and the remainder of some other ancestry. The majority of participants had completed minimum secondary schooling (69.3%), 13.0% were still in full-time tertiary education, 15.1% had a tertiary qualification, and 2.6% had some other qualification.

Measures

Tattoos. We followed Stieger et al. (2010) in asking participants to indicate whether or not they were tattooed. If a participant reported being tattooed, they were asked to indicate the number of tattoos on the following locations: back, stomach, buttocks, chest, upper arm, forearm, thigh, lower leg, and other. A total score was calculated as the sum of tattoos on all body parts.

Aggression. We measured aggression using the Aggression Questionnaire by Buss and Perry (1992). This is a 29-item instrument that measures four dispositional subtraits of aggression, namely Physical Aggression (9 items; sample item: "Given enough provocation, I may hit another person"), Verbal Aggression (5 items, sample item: "When people annoy me, I may tell them what I think of them"), Anger (7 items, sample item: "I have trouble controlling my temper"), and Hostility (8 items, sample item: "I sometimes feel that people are laughing at me behind my back"). All items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *Extremely uncharacteristic of me*, 5 = *Extremely characteristic of me*). Subscale scores were calculated as the mean of items associated with each factor, with higher scores reflecting greater dispositional aggression. The Aggression

Questionnaire has good psychometric properties (Buss & Perry, 1992). In the present study, Cronbach's α was $\geq .72$ for all subscales.

Rebelliousness. To measure rebelliousness, we used the Rebelliousness Questionnaire by McDermott (1988), an 18-item measure consisting of two subscales. Proactive Rebelliousness refers to a tendency to engage in negativistic behaviours for fun and excitement (i.e., active pursuit of rebellious activities for the sake of elevating excitement; sample item: "If you are asked particularly *not* to do something, do you feel an urge to do it?"), whereas Reactive Rebelliousness refers to tendency to commit unpremeditated acts in response to frustrating or disappointing events and situations (sample item: "If you get yelled at by someone in authority, would you (a) get angry and argue back; (b) try hard to avoid an argument; or (c) not sure?"). Both subscales consist of 7 forced-choice items, with 4 remaining items used as fillers. Subscale scores were computed as the sum of items associated with each factor. Previous work has shown that the Rebelliousness Questionnaire has good patterns of reliability and validity (McDermott, 1988). Here, Cronbach's α was .70 for both subscales.

Demographics. Participants provided their demographic details consisting of sex, age, ethnicity, and highest educational qualification.

Procedure

Ethics approval was obtained from the relevant university ethics committee. Three research assistants directly approached potential participants in London on weekdays between October 2014 and April 2015. In order to minimise selection bias, recruitment took place at different times of the day and in a range of sites of congregate activities (i.e., Underground stations, high streets, parks). Individuals who met inclusion criteria were invited to take part in a study on body art. If a respondent agreed to participate, they first gave informed consent and were then provided with an anonymous, paper-and-pencil questionnaire, which they were asked to complete individually in a dedicated area set up for the purposes of questionnaire-completion. The order of all the measures above was prerandomised for each participant. Participation was voluntary and without remuneration. Upon return of completed questionnaires, participants were provided with a debrief sheet containing further information about the project.

Results

Tattoo Prevalence

Overall, 97 respondents of the total sample of 378 (i.e., 25.7%) possessed at least one tattoo. Tattoo status did not vary as a function of respondent sex, $\chi^2(1)=1.15$, $p=.283$. Among participants who reported having a tattoo, the number of tattoos per individual ranged from 1 to 12, with a mean of 2.54 ($SD=2.39$, $Mdn=2.0$). Among this group, there was no significant difference in the mean number of tattoos possessed by women ($M=2.55$, $SD=2.82$) and men ($M=2.52$, $SD=1.82$), $t(95)=0.72$, $p=.956$, $d=0.01$.

Preliminary Between-Group Comparisons

We initially examined differences between participants with and without tattoos on key demographics. An independent t -test showed no significant difference in mean age between tattooed ($M=31.51$, $SD=11.12$) and non-tattooed individuals ($M=29.42$, $SD=11.07$), $t(376)=0.76$, $p=.110$, $d=0.19$. There were also no significant differences between tattooed and non-tattooed

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