

CORRELATIONS OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND PRACTICE WITH COLLEGE STUDENTS' TATTOO-RELATED BEHAVIOR¹

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Summary.—This research builds on a large body of literature which suggests that religious belief and practice suppress deviant behavior. Survey data from 520 undergraduates (64% freshmen and sophomores; 70% female; 80% Euro-American) at a large public university in the southwest were examined for whether students' strength of religious faith, church attendance, or frequency of prayer correlated with their having a tattoo, being interested in tattoos, or being likely to get a (or another) tattoo. Analysis showed strength of religious faith had a weak, negative correlation with having a tattoo, being interested in tattoos, and being likely to get a (or another) tattoo. Church attendance also weakly correlated with a reduced interest in tattooing. Since the strength of the numerous correlations was very low and barely reached statistical significance, religious belief and behavior do not appear to be associated substantively with attitudes and behavior regarding tattoos. This suggests increasing cultural acceptance of tattooing.

Researchers have consistently found that strong religious beliefs and active religious practices reduce the likelihood that individuals will engage in deviant behavior. Religiosity influences behavior as individuals identify with the norms and values of the religious subculture to which they belong (Bock, Cochran, & Beeghley, 1987). Gay and Ellison (1993) and Wellman (1999) contended that conservative denominations produce an especially strong subcultural identity. Members of groups like Southern Baptists, Nazarenes, or the Churches of Christ are less likely to tolerate what deviates from their group norms. These norms tend to emerge from more literal interpretations of the Bible and rigid understandings of sin and punishment.

Others seek to explain the role of religion by highlighting individuals' interactions within groups which lead to normative behavior. Stark (1984) argued that individuals whose friendship networks are strongly religious will be influenced by religious behavioral norms. Roberts, Koch, and Johnson (2001) showed that normative behavior persists among those who continue

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practicing their religion during and after the transition to college. Finally, several studies drew upon Merton and Rossi's reference group theory (1968) to explain how associating with religious people may reduce deviant behavior (Cochran, Beeghley, & Bock, 1988; Beeghley, Bock, & Cochran, 1990; Cochran & Beeghley, 1991). Religious reference groups produce conformity or resistance to deviance because they provide a context for the convergence of norms and values. They also facilitate continuity in maintaining social relationships with others with similar values. Again, research has shown that these factors are more salient among reference groups within proscriptive (conservative) religious environments (Bock, *et al.*, 1987; Cochran, *et al.*, 1988; Roberts, *et al.*, 2001).

Empirical studies of specific deviant behaviors also support these assertions. Individuals who express a strong religious faith are less likely to drink alcohol illegally, use illegal drugs, or engage in premarital or extramarital sex (Nelson & Rooney, 1982; Cochran & Beeghley, 1991; Brown, Parks, Zimmerman, & Phillips, 2001; Jaynes, 2001; Ford & Kadushin, 2002). Regular church attendance is inversely correlated with illegal alcohol and drug use as well as illicit sexual behavior (Cochran & Beeghley, 1991; Richard, Bell, & Carlson, 2000). Frequency of prayer correlates negatively with illegal alcohol and drug use (Brown, *et al.*, 2001). The association of religious belief and practice with reduced deviant behavior is especially apparent for individuals tied to religiously conservative groups (Peek, Chalfant, & Milton, 1979; Cochran, *et al.*, 1988; Welch & Legee, 1991; Peterson & Donnenwerth, 1997).

The influence of religious belief and practice has not been examined with respect to tattooing. What do strongly religious people think about tattoos? Are regular churchgoers less likely than others to have a tattoo? Are those who pray regularly less interested in tattoos than others? If tattooing is considered deviant among religious people, the negative correlations in the literature between religiosity and illegal drinking, drug use, and illicit sexual behavior would lead to expecting similar negative correlations between religiosity and interest in tattooing, having a tattoo, and getting a (or another) tattoo.

METHOD

Sample

Respondents were students at a large, publicly supported state university situated in the rural southwest. The larger community (population approximately 200,000) is disproportionately dominated by groups of students who hold conservative religious perspectives (Roberts, *et al.*, 2001). Following Institutional Review Board approval, questionnaires were distributed to undergraduate students enrolled in sociology courses ($N=520$). While the

study involved a convenience sample of college undergraduates, the respondents are of a generation likely to have tattoos. They have also been exposed to many positive images of tattooing in popular culture, sports, and entertainment (Sanders, 1989; DeMello, 2000; Forbes, 2001). Moreover, in this age group, obtaining a tattoo may not be an impulsive act. Rather, research suggests a period of deliberation and planning approaching two years before college-age individuals actually obtain a first tattoo (Armstrong & Pace-Murphy, 1997; Grief, Hewitt, & Armstrong, 1999). In a study of similar respondents, Forbes (2001) reported a mean age at the time of the first tattoo of 19.1 yr. for men and 22.5 yr. for women. This suggests our respondents are of an age when serious deliberation about tattooing may occur.

The sample was mostly female (70%) and Euro-American (80%). Eleven percent were Hispanic; 4% were African American. Five percent placed themselves in an Other racial or ethnic category. As would be expected in a sample of undergraduates, 85% were ages 18–22 ($M=20.7$ yr., $SD=4.2$). Sixty-four percent were first or second year college students. While 60% were from relatively large cities, 40% were from towns of less than 50,000 population. Fully one-half of the respondents indicated a religious affiliation with "Baptist" or "Church of Christ" (Campbellite) traditions.

Measures

Questions related to three independent and three dependent variables are described as follows.

Number of tattoos: "How many tattoos do you have?" (Range=0–5+)

Interest in tattoos: "In your opinion, how likely are you to be interested in tattoos?" (1) Extremely unlikely, (2) Unlikely, (3) Somewhat likely, (4) Very likely, (5) Definitely.

Getting a/another tattoo: "In your opinion, how likely are you to get a (or another) tattoo?" (1) Extremely unlikely, (2) Unlikely, (3) Somewhat likely, (4) Very likely, (5) Definitely.

Frequency of church attendance: "How often do you attend church now?" (1) Weekly or more often, (2) 2–3 times a month, (3) About once a month, (4) Several times a year, (5) Once or twice a year, (6) Never.

Strength of religious faith: "In general, would you consider your religious faith to be" (1) Very strong, (2) Moderately strong, (3) Moderately weak, (4) Very weak, (5) Non-existent.

Frequency of prayer: "About how often do you pray?" (1) Several times a day, (2) Daily, (3) Several times a week, (4) Once a week, (5) Less than once a week, (6) Never. Each of these three independent variables were reverse-coded for analysis.

After respondents signed the appropriate consent forms, they were asked the questions about their attitudes toward and experience with tattoos,

several social background questions, and about their religious beliefs and practices. The questionnaires were collected immediately. We administered the survey on examination days; students were given extra credit points for participating. There were no nonrespondents among those in attendance.

Analyses

Each of the variables were analyzed by calculating Pearson's product-moment correlations (r).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We expected that higher scores on religious faith and practice would be correlated with reduced interest in tattooing and lesser likelihood of having or getting a (or another) tattoo. Table 1 reports the zero-order correlation coefficients, means, and standard deviations for each of the independent and dependent variables.

TABLE 1
BIVARIATE CORRELATIONS OF STUDY VARIABLES

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Number of tattoos						
2. Be interested in tattoos	.42†					
3. Get a (or another) tattoo	.26†	.74†				
4. Church attendance	-.07	-.11*	-.07			
5. Strength of religious faith	-.09*	-.11*	-.09*	.51†		
6. Frequency of prayer	-.03	-.06	-.07	.49†	.60†	
M	.28	2.65	2.19	3.79	4.06	4.28
SD	.71	1.19	1.13	1.70	.90	1.42

Note.—N varies from 510 to 520. * $p < .05$, † $p < .01$ (two-tailed tests). 95% confidence intervals varied from $\pm .07$ to $\pm .11$.

Strength of religious faith had a significant and negative association with all three dependent variables [number of tattoos, interest in tattoos, and getting a (or another) tattoo], although the magnitudes of the correlations are very small. Church attendance was negatively correlated with interest in tattoos but not significantly correlated with number of tattoos or likelihood of getting a (or another) tattoo. Frequency of prayer was not significantly correlated with any of the dependent variables.

It should be remarked that parental education, sex, race, college classification, and religious affiliation were also correlated with the study variables. Women were more religious than males. Minorities were slightly more interested in tattoos. Juniors and seniors had more tattoos than freshmen and sophomores. Number of tattoos, interest in tattoos, and likelihood of getting a (or another) tattoo were regressed on the religious and demographic variables. Strength of religious faith had a slightly negative effect on num-

ber of tattoos after statistical controls. Magnitudes of these variables accounted for little common variance. None of the other religious variables had a statistically significant correlation with tattooing after statistical controls.

Our study shows that, in a very limited way, having a tattoo and expressing interest in tattooing are behaviors which are weakly negatively correlated with strength of religious faith. While the correlations between strength of religious faith and the three tattoo items were statistically significant, their magnitude indicates no substantive finding. Of the nine possible correlations, four are statistically significant; however, none of these correlations explain more than about 1% of the variance in tattooing behavior. We were somewhat surprised that the relationship between religious belief and practice and tattooing would be so weak. Although there are limitations in using a convenience sample of college students, this group was characterized by the predominance of conservative religiosity. This suggested that were religiosity negatively correlated with tattooing, it should be especially apparent among these respondents.

If religious beliefs and practices do not correlate negatively with tattooing behavior as has been noted in a large body of previous research with regard to substance use, sexuality, and many other forms of deviant behavior, is a tattoo a mark of deviance? Studies of the extent to which interest in tattoos and getting tattooed are becoming more common among adolescents, college students, and career women (Armstrong, 1991; Armstrong & McConnell, 1994; Armstrong & Pace-Murphy, 1997; Grief, *et al.*, 1999; Armstrong, Pace-Murphy, Sallee, & Watson, 2000) suggest that what was once normatively defined as deviant is probably becoming increasingly mainstream. Even so, 75% of these subjects did not have a tattoo when surveyed. Further research should examine whether tattooing among college-age individuals may become more common over the years.

As placement of a tattoo might vary with regard to individual's social ties, one could ask whether religious individuals who have tattoos are more likely to conceal the body art by placing it where clothing typically covers. Individuals' other social ties (to peers, family members, friends, and colleagues) might exert a stronger influence over tattooing attitudes and behavior than does religiosity. A more rigorous examination of such reference groups, friendship networks, and organizations to which tattooed individuals gravitate may clarify how incidence of this behavior has altered. Further research should examine the acceptance of tattooing, its persistence, and changes as individuals interact with one another at home, church, in the workplace, and during leisure-time activities.

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