

COLLEGE STUDENTS, TATTOOS, AND SEXUAL ACTIVITY¹

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Summary.—This research examined the association of having a tattoo and engaging in premarital sexual intercourse. Data gathered from a convenience sample of 450 college students indicated that tattooed respondents were substantively and significantly more likely to be sexually active than nontattooed college students. Tattooed men became sexually active at a significantly earlier age than nontattooed men but no such difference was found between tattooed and nontattooed college women.

Research findings indicate that the social behavior of tattooed college students differs in several ways from those who are not tattooed. Greif, Hewitt, and Armstrong (1999) found that college students with tattoos were more likely to abuse alcohol and use illegal drugs than those without tattoos. Drews, Allison, and Probst (2000) reported that male college students with tattoos were more likely to report an arrest history and have more sexual partners than nontattooed men. They also found that tattooed women were more likely to report having used illegal drugs and shoplifted. Burger and Finkel (2002) found that college students with tattoos were more likely to abuse alcohol and engage in unprotected sexual intercourse with strangers. Also, they found that having a tattoo did not predict premarital sex with a regular partner.

While these studies suggest body modification is a predictor or marker for deviance, college students also seem to regard tattooing as mainstream behavior (Armstrong, Owen, Roberts, & Koch, 2004; Koch, Roberts, Armstrong, & Owen, 2004). Premarital sexual intercourse among college students is also quite common (Netting & Burnett, 2004). This research examined the extent to which these behaviors, which are both categorically deviant in a traditional sense but are typical among college students, occur independently or in tandem.

The onset of adolescent sexual experience is a mark of individual development as well as a correlate to deviant behavior and emotional problems.

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South, Haynie, and Bose (2005) found that adolescents who had recently moved were more likely to become sexually active at an earlier age. They also found that moving lowered academic performance and made it more likely that adolescents would exhibit delinquent behavior. These results stem from unstable friendship networks in new locations. Longmore, Manning, and Giordano (2004) found depressive symptoms and low self-esteem were more likely among those with earlier onset of sexual intercourse. Thus, we also examine whether earlier onset of sexual experience raises the likelihood that individuals will subsequently obtain a tattoo. Perhaps a tattoo becomes a mark of distinction in a new environment or is a compensator for social or emotional deprivation.

Data were gathered from a sample of undergraduates at a large, public university in the southwestern USA. Respondents were recruited from students enrolled in lower-level sociology courses. After obtaining appropriate IRB approval and signed consent forms, a total of 450 respondents were surveyed. The questionnaires were distributed on examination days to maximize participation; all in attendance chose to do so. Eighty-five percent were 18 to 22 years of age ($M=20.9$, $SD=4.5$). Of the 450 respondents, 22.2% or 100 had at least one tattoo. We also noted that 60 to 75% of the respondents indicated their religious faith was moderate to very strong, that they attended church at least once a month, and prayed on a daily basis. This is typical among college students in this geographic vicinity (Roberts, Koch, & Johnson, 2001).

Variables were defined by answers to two questions: (1) How many tattoos do you have? (range 0 to 5 or more) and (2) At what age did you first experience premarital sexual intercourse?

Respondents were asked to fill in a blank indicating their age when they first had sexual intercourse. Alternatively, they were asked to indicate that "I have never done this." Results below are comparative percentages and means tested for statistical significance using chi-square and *t* test.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows that for both men and women of this sample, having a tattoo is a statistically significant indicator of having been sexually active. Of tattooed men 96.1% had been sexually active compared to 72.4% of the nontattooed men, and 94.6% of tattooed women had been sexually active compared to 68.1% of the nontattooed women. Tattooed respondents also indicated they became sexually active at an earlier age than those without tattoos. Tattooed men became sexually active, on the average, 18 mo. earlier than nontattooed men. Tattooed women did so, on the average, 5 mo. earlier than nontattooed women. In our study this difference is statistically significant for men only.

TABLE 1
TATTOOING AND SEXUAL ACTIVITY (N = 446)

Measure	Tattooed				Nontattooed				χ^2	
	Men		Women		Men		Women		Men	Women
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>		
% Sexually active	96.1	25	94.6	70	72.4	71	68.1	169	6.60 [†]	20.84 [‡]
M Age at initial sexual activity									<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	15.8		16.8		17.3		17.2		2.94 [†]	93
									1.26	237

**p* = .05. [†]*p* = .01. [‡]*p* = .001.

Nearly all of our tattooed respondents were sexually active compared to fewer than three-fourths of the nontattooed respondents. Tattooed men in the sample first experienced sexual intercourse, on average, a year and a half or so earlier than nontattooed men. However, that cited literature suggests tattooing is mainstream and that sexual intercourse is common among college students leaves us reluctant to explain these findings solely in light of the literature which suggests tattooing is a predictor of deviance.

Because of the strongly religious character of the sample, we were somewhat surprised by the amount of sexual activity among both tattooed and nontattooed respondents. Only 24.6% (*n* = 111) of our 450 respondents were virgins. This is consistent with findings from a large, national probability study on the frequency of sexual behavior among North American college students (Netting & Burnett, 2004). Further research is needed to extend our understanding of both body modification and sexual behavior in ways that go beyond the social psychology of deviance. Several possibilities emerge.

Perhaps individuals obtain a tattoo in an effort to attract sexual partners. Those who are attracted to someone with a tattoo may appreciate and be attracted by nuances of body style and body language such that they also choose to express themselves more sexually. Also tattooing and sexual activity may be ways of seeking sensations categorically similar to riding the highest and fastest roller-coasters, traveling to exotic locales, or plunging into very cold water on a hot day. Finally, while college students seem not to regard tattooing as especially deviant, there remains an air of unconventionality associated with multiple, vivid, and visible body art that may also be regarded as attractive. The differences between deviance and unconventionality are subtle. These are just a few of the issues which are yet to be studied with reference to the social and sexual behavior of those with body modification.

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