

CORRELATES OF TATTOOS AND REFERENCE GROUPS¹

ALDEN E. ROBERTS AND JEROME R. KOCH

*Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work
Texas Tech University*

MYRNA L. ARMSTRONG AND DONNA C. OWEN

*School of Nursing
Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center*

Summary.—520 college students from a public university in the southwest were questioned to examine correlations between having a tattoo and the presence of tattoos among their family and friends. Tattoos among both friends and family were positively correlated with respondents' having a tattoo. The magnitude of friends' influence was about double the influence of family.

As young people grow through adolescence and into young adulthood, peer reference groups tend to become more important than family reference groups, especially with regard to the onset of deviant behavior (1, 2, 3, 4, 6). Many college students in late adolescence are away from home for the first time. Dormitory life brings college students in close contact with many new peers. They have gained in legal status by the 18th birthday which may enable them to get a tattoo without parental consent or despite parental opposition. So, one may predict that as college students form friendships with others who are tattooed, the likelihood of obtaining a (or another) tattoo increases. As one must also account for the persistence of family influence, it may be predicted that having family members with tattoos increases likelihood of obtaining a tattoo.

Method.—Questionnaires were distributed to 520 undergraduate students enrolled in Sociology courses at a large, publicly supported state university situated in a largely rural area of the southwest. The sample was mostly female (70%) and Euro-American (80%). Eleven percent were Hispanic; 4% were African-American. When asked, "How many tattoos do you have?" (range = 0–5+), 18.7% of respondents had at least one tattoo. When asked "How many of your five closest friends have tattoos," 75% of the respondents had at least one such friend. To the request, "Identify all individuals in your immediate family who have a tattoo," 29.0% stated at least one member.

¹Address correspondence to Jerome R. Koch, Ph.D., Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work, Box 41012, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX 79409 or e-mail (jerome.koch@ttu.edu).

Results and discussion.—Table 1 reports the zero-order Pearson product-moment correlations, means, and standard deviations for each variable. Number of Tattoos was significantly and positively related to Number of Friends with Tattoos, supporting the proposition that friendship reference networks exert a positive influence ($r = .28$). Number of Tattoos was also significantly and positively, but weakly, associated with Number of Family Members with Tattoos ($r = .10$), suggesting some family influence, perhaps, despite being away from home.

TABLE 1
BIVARIATE CORRELATIONS OF STUDY VARIABLES ($N = 520$)

Variable	1	2	3
1. Number of Tattoos			
2. Number of Friends with Tattoos	.28†		
3. Number of Family Members with Tattoos	.10	.01	
<i>M</i>	.28	1.67	.56
<i>SD</i>	.71	1.38	.81

* $p < .01$ (two-tailed test). 95% confidence intervals varied between $\pm .09$ and $\pm .15$.

As expected, peer influence for tattooing was somewhat stronger. That many of our tattooed respondents had at least one immediate family member with a tattoo also suggests tattoos may now be in the mainstream of American culture. Further research must at least question the assumption that having a tattoo is an index of social deviance. Tattoos are becoming more visible on celebrities and increasingly prevalent among young and older adults (5, 7). Study of youths' perceptions and motivations toward getting a tattoo as well as the meaning of having a tattoo for different categories of people in American culture could be helpful.

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