INKING AND THINKING: HONORS STUDENTS AND TATTOOS

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This study examines whether academically accelerated students in a college Honors program are as likely as other students to acquire a tattoo and to spend the same amount of time contemplating this decision. A convenience sample of 71 honors students and 135 non-honors students completed a survey at a small mid-Atlantic liberal arts college in 2014 (response rate: 100%). Fewer Honors students had tattoos (13% versus 29%) and a greater proportion of those who did thought about this decision for at least a year (75% versus 19%). Having a majority of friends or parents with tattoos predicted only which non-Honors students had tattoos, suggesting that Honors students’ decision about tattoos may be less subject to influence by peer and parents. Honors students with tattoos were also those least likely to express concern that a tattoo could adversely affect their employment. These data suggest that the subset of Honors students with tattoos may be less sensitive to the approval of others. Instead, their tattoos may reflect a willingness to defy expectations and assumptions that stem from their academic standing.

Introduction

Although as many as 30% of undergraduates acquire a tattoo (King & Vidourek, 2013), these students risk stigma associated with this choice (Adams, 2010; Firmin et al., 2012; Hawkes et al., 2004; Irwin, 2002; Scott & Vanston, 2008), in part because lingering associations of tattoos with lower social class and behaviors such as substance abuse and risky sexual activity (King & Vidourek, 2013). In spite of the stigma, especially for those with a greater number and increased visibility of tattoos (Dickson et al., 2014), a growing number of college students have embraced this art form as a means to express their identity (Dickson et al., 2015; Strohecker, 2011; Kang & Jones, 2014). In the midst of the “Tattoo Renaissance” (Roberts, 2012), students must consider such issues as whether tattoos are a fad with permanent consequences (Kosut, 2006) as well as their potential impact on securing employment (Burgess, 2010; Foltz, 2014; Martin & Dula, 2010).

These concerns may be heightened among those who excel academically. Among a sample of 11,010 adolescents who were part of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health in the 1994-1995 school year, college-bound students were less than half as likely to have a tattoo compared to their non-college-bound counterparts (Silver, 2011). Analysis of these same data from the mid-1990s revealed that those with higher grade point averages were less likely to acquire a
tattoo. These high performers may seek to avoid risking the disapproval of adults who could play a role in their attaining high-level professional success (Silver et al., 2009). Questions remain, however, about to what degree academic achievement still predicts tattoo acquisition. To answer this question, this study examines whether tattooing differs among students enrolled in a program limited to academically advanced students who were part of an Honors Program.

Methods

Data were collected in 2014 from a small liberal arts college in the mid-Atlantic region with an undergraduate student population of about 1,500. Using convenience sampling, 206 students completed an anonymous, IRB-approved paper survey. The sample consisted of 71 Honors students (out of a total of 153 total Honors students at the college) while the remaining 135 students were not from the Honors program. All students whose participation was solicited completed the survey (an 100% response rate).

Prospective students in the top 10% of the college’s applicant pool are invited to apply to the Honors Program based on a combination of their core high school GPA, SAT verbal and math scores, writing samples, honors classes, AP classes, class ranks, and other areas of significant achievement. Students entering in Fall 2014 had an average SAT math and verbal score of 1361 and an average GPA of 3.96.

Results

The gender representation of the sample matched that of both the college overall and the Honors program: the non-Honors sample was 49% male and 51% female while the Honors sample was 38% male and 62% female. Among all respondents, 23% of males and 23% of females had tattoos. Fewer Honors students (14%) had tattoos than non-Honors students (30%) (p=.01). In addition to being less likely to have a tattoo, Honors students with tattoos were much more likely to have mulled over the decision for at least a year (75% versus 19% of non-Honors students) and none had acquired a tattoo on impulse (versus 13% of non-Honors students) (p=.05) (see Figure 1). Parental tattoos were predictive of respondents’ tattoos only for non-Honors students (p=.01 for mothers and p=.002 for fathers) (see Figure 2). The majority of Honors students with tattoos (56%) have few tattooed friends (no more than 25% of all of their friends) compared to 20% of non-Honors tattooed students (p=.007) indicating that non-Honors students with tattoos are most likely to have the greatest proportion of friends with tattoos (see Figure 3). Similarly, among those without tattoos, 20% of Honors students versus 43% of non-Honors students said that their parents were a factor in their decision not to get a tattoo (p=.001). When students were also queried about the potential impact of a tattoo on future employment, strong differences emerged between tattooed and non-tattooed Honors students: those with tattoos were least concerned (22%), fewer than those without tattoos (62%) (p=.08: level of significance affected by small sample size of Honors students). See Figure 4.

Discussion

Compared to non-Honors students, Honors students are only half as likely to have a tattoo. Yet those who do have a tattoo may make their decision independent of their friends and parents, and with less concern about the tattoo interfering with their employment. They differ from the majority of Honors students without tattoos who may be unwilling to potentially jeopardize employment options and advancement.

Despite their willingness to buck the non-tattooed norm of their subgroup, Honor students’ decision usually involves a period of contemplation of at least one year. The
Figure 1

Honors Status & Time to Decide First Tattoo

- Honors
- Non-Honors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impulse</th>
<th>Less than 3 mos</th>
<th>3 mos-1 yr</th>
<th>1+ year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

p=.05

Figure 2 Difference in parental tattoos between non-Honors students with and without tattoos significant for mothers (p=.01) and fathers (p=.002)

Percent with Parents with Tattoos

- mother
- father

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Honors with tattoos</th>
<th>Honors no tattoo</th>
<th>Non-Honors with tattoos</th>
<th>Non-Honors no tattoo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 3

Percent reporting that no more than 25% of friends have tattoos

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Honors with tattoos</th>
<th>Non-Honors with tattoos</th>
<th>Honors without tattoos</th>
<th>Non-Honors without tattoos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

p = .007

Note: Included in these percent totals are 1% of Honors students without tattoos and 4% of non-Honors students without tattoos that have no friends with tattoos.

Figure 4 Difference between Honors students with and without tattoos: p < .10 (level of significance affected by small sample size of Honors students)

Percent Very Concerned that a Tattoo Could Affect Employment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Honors with tattoos</th>
<th>Non-Honors with tattoos</th>
<th>Honors without tattoos</th>
<th>Non-Honors without tattoos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
extended time taken before acquiring a tattoo may relate to the values instilled in their previous accelerated academic programs or environment. More contemplation time may be a response to expectations that they pursue careers with stricter, more traditionally professional settings commonly known to be averse to tattoos (Foltz, 2014). In addition, taking time to mull over the decision could also stem from long-term encouragement to carefully consider the various implications of all of their decisions, perhaps related to why not a single Honors student made an impulsive decision to get a tattoo.

These tattooed Honors students may be less likely to be guided by the norms embraced by parents or friends. Other research that having tattooed friends and family members reduces stigma (Dickson et al., 2014) may be applicable only to non-Honors students for whom there was a correlation between having many friends with tattoos and their decision to acquire a tattoo.

Honor students’ decision to acquire a tattoo may reflect a need to depart from subcultural norms, unlike their non-Honors counterparts, whose decisions are more consistent with their friends’ and parents’ actions. For tattooed Honors students, tattoos may be a visible manifestation of their willingness to reject convention, a type of rebellion against the conformity expected for those on a high-level career trajectory. The thought devoted to acquiring a tattoo may be a result of how Honors students cope with likely scrutiny of their decisions, especially those choices that defy norms for high achievers. Future research should examine whether this subset of academically accelerated students differ long-term in their career path and sense of well-being.

References
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