

PERCEPTIONS OF TATTOOS IN FUTURE ROMANIAN SOCIAL WORKERS

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to explore an uncharted topic in Romanian social work literature: the social perception of tattoos in future social workers. Romanian and international research literature is briefly reviewed to get an understanding of social perceptions about tattoos as they are associated with marginalized groups traditionally served by social workers, such as victims of human trafficking, people deprived of liberty, and people with substance abuse. We then aim to explore social work students' perceptions about tattoos, and the attitudes elicited by such perceptions in encounters with social work beneficiaries. An exploratory research project was conducted with social work students in their 1st, 2nd and 3rd year of study at West University of Timisoara, Romania regarding students' social perception of tattoos.*

Key words: *tattoo, social work, marginalized populations, social acceptance*

1. Introduction

The history of tattooing illustrates that its functionality varies across time and societies: the tattooing of a secret symbol, as the magic sign in the case of Indonesian kaken hunters, or of the totemic animal or emblem common among tribes; tattooing of an eminently religious message would also transmit that message and secure a place in the afterlife by showing the gods their devotion to them. Another category of functionality was the tattoo as part of an initiation ritual, including national elements to indicate maturation. Amerindians tattooed their entire bodies to protect themselves from diseases.

The body is a symbolic medium of communication about power in social relations (Țîru, 2019, Swami et al., 2020). Wymann (2010) argues that tattooing can be understood as a form of social behavior. A tattoo, for example can represent resistance

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to social pressure and a high level of bodily appreciation, acceptance and respect for the body (Swami et al., 2017). Even more, tattoos and the stories associated with them can sometimes be considered tools that help people build their personal brand. In this regard, a personal brand is “a consensus about who and what an individual is, about its reputation and public image” (Rezeanu and Coman, 2018, p.106). Tattoos are powerful symbols, which for many people have a strong personal meaning, so strong that many of them look at their bodies as canvases on which they transpose, in the form of art, their way of being and who they are. Hence, a symbol can be considered any idea, action or object that expresses the meaning of another idea, action, or object (Coman, 2008, p.49). In the process of tattooing, the body becomes a form of symbolic cultural venture, a process of identity-making efforts (Bottrell 2007). However, tattoos can also be used in order to show, and promote a certain image. Thus, in cases there are significant differences between the way people perceive themselves and the way they are perceived by others, we can talk about an inconsistent image that deepens the distance between what we are and the messages we send about ourselves. (Coman, 2018, p.13) In this context, attention must be given to the way people present the stories of their tattoos.

2. Social Work Beneficiaries and Tattoos: Connections

Tattoo's prevalence among people deprived of liberty, suffering from substance abuse, victims of human trafficking, and of low motivation is well-known. In western literature, tattoos have been seen as indication of mental health concerns such as substance abuse, antisocial personality disorder, depression, and a desire for being outside of social norms (Țîru, 2019, Roberts & Ryan, 2002, Brooks et al, 2003, Borokhov, Bastiaans, & Lerner, 2006; Samuel et al, 2001, Barron, Vintila & Swami, 2020).

Historically speaking, tattoos have been found more often on those who were violently placed under the law (Benson, 2000). With regard to the motivation of individuals who get tattooed, Lemma (2010), informed by clinical research and practice as therapist, argues that tattooed individuals suffer from a great deal of clinical issues, including body image disturbance, appearance anxiety, and body dysmorphic disorder. Even suicidal ideas can be related to this topic (Voracek et al, 2008, Voracek, Vintila & Muranyi, 2007). The literature shows that tattoos have a history linked to deviance and marginalized populations. Lemma's argument brings the deviant history of tattooed people into the clinical process and perpetuates the notion that tattoos are symbols of psychiatric concerns that therapists need to be aware of during assessment and treatment (McInerney, 2011).

2.1. Tattoos in people deprived of liberty

Minovici N., in his work "Tattoos in Romania," argues that for people deprived of liberty, tattoos represent and reflect their way of thinking, their moral principles and a form of group identification. Some tattoos are symbols of religious beliefs, symbols of power and belonging. The story of a detainee's life, in short, can be reflected in the tattoos they have. Tattoos provide information about a person's life charting events, accomplishments, intimate circle of people (wife, girlfriend, children, parents, etc.) and

communal living in one's neighbourhood. According to Minovici, the most common tattoos among Romanian detainees are crosses, hearts, the five dots "alone between four walls." Less common are tattoos indicating certain group identification or having a cultural message" (Minovici, 2XXX). Stories are told through images with a meaning sometimes known only to those familiar with the language of tattoos. Thus, the action of getting a tattoo can be discussed with regards to the image of the individual. Tattoos usually have significant meaning for a person, and they can also be seen as products, acquisitions. In this regard, through certain acquisitions that people make, through certain investments and improvements that they make, they try to build and create an identity that matches their image about themselves, an image that they present to those around them. (Coman, 2019, p.31) A study conducted by the Romanian National Administration of Penitentiaries in 2007 on a sample of 1003 Romanian detainees reported that 57% of men and 56% of women got tattoos in penitentiaries. People aged 15 to 29 were more likely to have tattoos than people over 30 in this study.

2.2. Tattoos in people with substance abuse disorders

Borokhov and Learner (2006) in their "Tattoo Designs among Drug Abusers" argue that the high rate of tattoos in drug users, may reflect the lack of social reintegration, as well as an obstacle to the rehabilitation process. Reporting on a study of males with tattoos and substance abuse problems in forensic psychiatric wards, prisons and military recruitment centers during the period 1986-2000 in the former Soviet Union, the authors found that two-thirds of the tattoo images were related to a specific drug. Typical markers found were images of "poppy," "hemp leaf," and "mushrooms" for opioids, cannabis and hallucinogens. Symbols that indicate the consumption of substances in general included: "syringes" and different symbols of death, such as "skull with snake." Some tattoos served to hide signs of repeated drug use, others to identify ideal sites for injection (Borokov & Learner, 2006).

2.3. Tattoos in victims of human trafficking

The literature that links tattoos to human trafficking, indicates that tattoos of names and explicit content found in children can be indicative of trafficking (Greenbaum, 2016). Tattoos were found to be common (48%) in commercially sexually exploited children (Greenbaum et al., 2018). Male names, barcodes, currencies, the letters "ATM", five-point crown, money bags or gang symbols tattoos, found on the neck, inner thigh, or around the genitals could be associated with human trafficking (Geynisman-Tan et al., 2017; Kelly 2017). Human trafficking victims are coerced into getting tattooed as a way to signify that they are property and belong to a trafficker and to show the value of the victim in relation to the income they produce. Small hearts, accompanied by names or initials, have often been identified. The location of these tattoos was discovered in visible areas: arm, face or hand, others can be located in areas such as: lower back, intimate areas or even on the eyelids. Not all these symbols of wealth, names, and hearts are trafficking tattoos, but they are known to be used by traffickers (Bullens and Van Horn 2002; Kelly, 2017; Sidner, 2015; Swanberg, 2015).

2.4. Tattoos in social work professionals

Research on social workers with tattoos and how the tattoos, especially if visible, impact the therapeutic and working alliance with beneficiaries is limited. The field of social work could benefit from a closer look at tattooing practices for several reasons. First, tattoos are becoming more popular, especially among women (Haelow, 2010), and the majority of social workers identify as women. Second, many of the social work beneficiaries have tattoos as well, often pathologized in the field and stigmatized in larger society. Third, tattoos can create a sense of closeness between social worker and clients, based on their shared tattooed skin. McInerney (2011) in her study on female workers with visible tattoos claims that the “therapist’s entire self, including their visible tattoos, can be used as a tool to aid in strengthening the healing potential of therapeutic alliance” (McInerney, 2011, p.7). Social Workers with tattoos in this study use self-disclosure to make their clients with tattoos feel seen, safe, and understood.

Conversations about tattoos, as a shared experience, can create a sense of closeness, trust and a way to understand client’s expectations from therapy. Social workers are required to carefully apply self-disclosure strategies, part of the skills acquired in their professional training (Goian, 2004) to better connect with the people they serve. The structuring of a coherent language is important in the activity of the social worker, a specialized language that most importantly must not send inappropriate messages to beneficiaries. (Goian, 2010). Professional social workers with tattoos do learn to carefully manage the concealing or revealing their tattoos for the benefit of the client (McInerney, 2011). The revealing of tattoos can negatively influence the therapeutic relationship, as the stigmas around tattoos are real, and some social work beneficiaries do hold negative views about tattoos. Another important reason for social workers to carefully consider revealing their tattoos is the fact that for some victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse, tattoos can be a trigger for flashbacks and PTSD (McInerney, 2011). For all the above reasons a discussion about self-disclosure on the subject should be recommended to take place between the social worker and his supervisor before openly addressing these subjects with the beneficiary and potentially jeopardizing the professional relationship (Runcan, Goian and Tiru, 2012)

3. Current Study

This study seeks to explore social work students’ perceptions and attitudes towards tattoos. We focus on perceptions of and attitudes towards professionals with tattoos in the field of social work, and the impact of tattoos’ visibility in encounters with social work beneficiaries. This exploratory research project was conducted with social work students in their 1st, 2nd and 3rd year of study at West University of Timisoara, Romania.

3.1. Hypotheses

1. Social work students closer to graduation, in their 3rd year, will be less prejudiced against tattoos and will be more accepting of social work professionals with tattoos than 1st and 2nd year students.

We tapped into social work students attitudes towards tattoos pertaining to their professional practice by exploring general attitudes as in “do you find it acceptable for social workers to have tattoos” and the self-assessed propensity to enforce these attitudes as in “would you hire a social worker with tattoos?” Also we attempted to further understand students’ attitudes by addressing expectations about the visibility of tattoos in professional life. This can shed light into understanding the distinctions students make between professional and personal life, as well as expectations regarding professionalism in social work.

2. Social work students entering the field, 1st year students will be more likely to associate tattooing with marginalized and deviant groups in society than students more advanced in their professional training, 2nd and 3rd year students.

To explore this hypothesis two images were presented to students. The first picture showed a person with a face tattoo. Students were asked to assign the picture to a social group they thought that person belonged to. Three options were made available. Students could presume the person is: a college professor, a person deprived of liberty or a politician. The second picture showed a person with a back tattoo. Students were asked to assign each picture to a social group they thought that person belonged to. Three options were made available. Students could presume the person is: a socially integrated person, a person deprived of liberty or a person with substance abuse disorders.

3. Less than 20% of social work students (including all 3 years of study) do have tattoos. Students’ self-reports about number of tattoos they have, if any, and if they are visible or hidden were used.

3.2. Sample

63 social work students in their 1st, 2nd and 3rd year of study at West University of Timisoara, Romania

4. Results

Hypothesis 1: Social work students closer to graduation, in their 3rd year, will be less prejudiced against tattoos and will be more accepting of social work professionals with tattoos than 1st and 2nd year students

Table 1

Acceptance of tattoos related to study year

Number of Students by Year of Study	If you were an employer, would you hire a social worker with tattoos?		Total
	YES	NO	
1 st Year	8	7	15
2 nd Year	11	5	16
3 rd Year	27	5	32
Total	46 (73%)	17 (27%)	63 (100%)

Out of 15 social work students enrolled in their 1st year of study, more than half (53,3%) would hire a professional with tattoo in their field. Out of 16 social work students enrolled in their 2nd year of study, 68.8% would hire a professional with tattoo in their field. Out of 32 social work students enrolled in their 3rd and final year of study, 84.4% would hire a professional with a tattoo in their field.

Table 2

Acceptance for social workers to have tattoos

Number of Students by Year of Study	Is it acceptable, in your view, for a social worker to have tattoos?		Total
	YES	NO	
1 st Year	5	10	15
2 nd Year	10	6	16
3 rd Year	29	3	32
Total	44 (69%)	19 (31%)	63 (100%)

Out of 15 social work students enrolled in their 1st year of study, 33% found it acceptable for a social worker to have tattoos. Out of 16 social work students enrolled in their 2nd year of study 62% found it acceptable for a social worker to have tattoos. Out of 32 social work students enrolled in their 3rd and final year of study, 90.6% found it acceptable for a social worker to have tattoos.

Table 3

Acceptance of tattoos at social workers related to their visibility

Number of Students by Year of Study	Is it acceptable, in your view, for a social worker to have:			Total
	a) visible tattoos; b) hidden tattoos; c) both visible and hidden tattoos			
	visible tattoos	hidden tattoos	both visible and hidden tattoos	
1 st Year	3	8	4	15
2 nd Year	8	7	1	16
3 rd Year	15	11	6	32
Total	26 (41%)	26 (41%)	11 (18%)	63

Out of 15 social work students enrolled in their 1st year of study, 20% found it acceptable for a social worker to have visible tattoos, 53 % found hidden tattoos and 26.7% found acceptable both visible and hidden tattoos. Out of 16 social work students enrolled in their 2nd year of study 50% found it acceptable for a social worker to have visible tattoos, 43.8 % found hidden tattoos and 6.2% found both visible and hidden tattoos acceptable. Out of 32 social work students enrolled in their 3rd and final year of study, 46.9% found it acceptable for a social worker to have visible tattoos, 34.4% found hidden tattoos and 18.8% found both visible and hidden tattoos acceptable. Our hypothesis that social work students closer to graduation will be less prejudiced against tattoos was supported by the higher percentage of the 2nd and 3rd year students who

found tattoos acceptable, and who were willing to hire professionals with tattoos than 1st year students. Also, regarding the visibility of tattoos in professional social workers, a higher percent (50 % -2nd year; 46.9% -3rd year) of students in their 2nd and 3rd year found visible tattoos acceptable in comparison with 1st year students (20% -1st year). We expected to see increased tolerance and acceptance of diversity and less prejudice in social work students further advanced in their professional training.

Hypothesis 2: Social work students just entering the field, 1st year students will be more likely to associate tattooing with marginalized and deviant groups in society than students more advanced in their professional training, 2nd and 3rd year students .

We hypothesize that the attitudes of students entering the field would reflect the historical association of tattoos with marginality and deviance, an attitude still common in Romanian society. Two images were presented to students. The first picture showed a person with a face tattoo. Students were asked to assign each picture to a social group they thought that person belonged to. Three options were made available. Students could presume the person is: a college professor, a person deprived of liberty or a politician. The second picture showed a person with a back tattoo. Students were asked to assign each picture to a social group they thought that person belonged to. Three options were made available. Students could presume the person is: a socially integrated person, a person deprived of liberty or a person with substance abuse disorders.

Table 4

Assigning of social group belonging of face tattooed persons

Number of Students by Year of Study	To which social group do you think the person in the picture is more likely to belong to? Picture: PERSON WITH A FACE TATTOO			Total
	College Professor	Person Deprived of Liberty	Politician	
1 st Year	3	7	5	15
2 nd Year	3	4	9	16
3 rd Year	5	6	21	32
Total	11 (17.4%)	17 (26.9%)	35 (55.5%)	63 (100%)

The 15 social work students enrolled in their 1st year of study, assigned the person with a face tattoo as follows: 20% (3) as possibly being a college professor, 46% (7) as possibly being deprived of liberty and 33% (5) as possibly being a politician.

The 16 social work students enrolled in their 2nd year of study assigned the person with a face tattoo as follows: 18.7% (3) as possibly being a college professor, 25% (4) as possibly being deprived of liberty and 56.2% (9) as possibly being a politician.

The 32 social work students enrolled in their 3rd and final year of study, assigned the person with a face tattoo as follows: 15.6% (5) as possibly being a college professor, 18.7% (6) as possibly being deprived of liberty and 65.6% (21) as possibly being a politician. Our findings suggest that the majority of our social work students assumed that a person with a face tattoo could be a socially integrated person, even a public

figure such as a politician or a college professor (53% of 1st year students, 74% of 2nd year students and 80.6% of 3rd year students). We also noted that the percentage of students making these assumptions tends to increase by year of study, with students in the terminal year having a more positive view of tattoos. Also to be noted, is that a significant percentage of students in each year associated a tattooed face with delinquency, and deviant behavior: 46% of 1st year students, 25% of 2nd year students and 18.7% of 3rd year students. Again, we noticed a change in the percentage of students making these assumptions by year of study, with a higher percentage of 1st year students associating a tattooed face with deviance in comparison with 2nd and 3rd year students (46% vs. 25% and 18.7%).

Table 5

Number of Students by Year of Study	To which social group do you think the person in the picture is more likely to belong to? Picture: PERSON WITH A BACK TATTOO			Total
	Socially integrated person	Person Deprived of Liberty	A person with substance abuse disorders	
1 st Year	6	5	4	15
2 nd Year	11	2	3	16
3 rd Year	21	8	3	32
Total	38(60.3%)	15(23.8%)	10(15.8%)	63 (100%)

The 15 social work students enrolled in their 1st year of study, assigned the person with a back tattoo as follows: 40% (6) as possibly a socially integrated person, 33.3% (5) as possibly being deprived of liberty and 26.6% (4) as possibly being a person with substance abuse disorders. The 16 social work students enrolled in their 2nd year of study assigned the person with a face tattoo as follows: 68.7% (11) as possibly a socially integrated person, 12.5% (2) as possibly being deprived of liberty and 18.7% (3) as possibly being a person with substance use disorders.

The 32 social work students enrolled in their 3rd and final year of study, assigned the person with a face tattoo as follows: 65.6 % (21) as possibly a socially integrated person, 25%(8) as possibly being deprived of liberty and 9.3% (3) as possibly being a person with substance abuse disorders. Our findings suggest that the majority of our social work students in 2nd and 3rd year of study assumed that a person with a back tattoo could be a socially integrated person (68.7 % of 2nd year students and 65.6% of 3rd year students), but that the majority of the 1st year students assumed that a person with a back tattoo would be deviant (59.6% of 1st year students). In terms of forms of deviance students associated tattoos with, we see relative small differences. More 1st and 3rd year students associated tattoos with people deprived of liberty and more 1st year students associated tattoos with substance abuse problems.

Hypothesis 3: Less than 20% of social work students (including all 3 years of study) do have tattoos.

Table 6

Tattoos present at social work students

Number of Students by Year of Study	Do you have any tattoos? If you do, how many?			Total
	No tattoos	Yes, I have between 1 and 5 tattoos	Yes, I have more than 5 tattoos	
1 st Year	14	1	0	15
2 nd Year	14	2	0	16
3 rd Year	24	7	1	32
Total	52(82.5%)	10(15.8%)	1(1.5%)	(100%)

Table 7

Visibility of tattoos at social work students

Number of Students by Year of Study	If you do have tattoos, are they...?			Total
	Visible	Hidden	Both Visible and Hidden	
1 st Year	1	0	0	1
2 nd Year	1	1	0	2
3 rd Year	3	2	1	7
Total	5	3	1	(100%)

In our sample of 63 social work students, 11 (17.4%) students reported they have at least one tattoo, 1 (1.5%) student reported having more than five tattoos and 52 (82.5%) reported they have no tattoos. Out of the 11 students with tattoos, 5 of them have them in visible places, 3 of them hidden and 1 student has both hidden and visible tattoos.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Our findings indicate that a high percentage of social work students express neutral or positive attitudes (69% and 73%) regarding tattooed social work professionals. However, we see that 31% of students do not find it acceptable for social workers to have tattoos, and 27% will not hire a social worker with a tattoo. Considering that workplace discrimination is one impact of prejudicial attitudes towards tattoos, and tattoos are one of the few physical categorizations that are legal to discriminate against in the workplace (Broussard & Harton, 2018) these findings are deserving of attention. These findings raise relevant questions for current debates about social work professional standards, and what it means to be a professional. Social work as a profession celebrates human diversity, but many new professional social workers, report they are required by their employers to cover their tattoos (Williams, Thomas & Christensen, 2014). Are these policies inconsistent with social work's own core values? Do we need to rethink common standards of professional appearance, specifically regarding social workers who may have visible tattoos? We also need to further explore the impact of

prejudicial attitudes towards tattooed people as manifest in involuntary and unconscious discrimination against demographic groups who are more likely to have visible tattoos (Miller, McGlashan Nicols, & Eure, 2009), many of these groups being social work clients. There are still many stereotypes and prejudices related to tattoos, including associations with the world of prison and crime. Emphasis should be placed on the fact that tattoos can be a form of therapeutic healing, a form of writing about life, events, feelings, on one's own skin, more precisely an art. The tattoo represents, an end and a beginning, written on the skin they are a diary, themes of conversation or memorials for the deceased, scars and symptoms, mistakes and corrections. Overall, they form a life story.

We propose exploring the psychological aspects of tattoos in order to review obsolete stigmas about tattooing and helping social workers and clinicians who work with beneficiaries holding tattoos, to facilitate the understanding of the meaning of skin art and self-identity. Future studies could also analyze the relationship between connecting with nature, body image and tattoos, known to be the effects of connecting with nature but also the application of tattoos on the image and body appreciation (Swami et al. 2020).

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