

Visible Body Modification in Hiring Practices

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Abstract

Due to increasing competition for jobs, employers are able to select from a large pool of candidates. A tattooed person may experience negative social consequences, including negative perceptions because of tattoos and piercings (Resenhoef, Villa, & Wiseman, 2008). The research question was, "What are the attitudes of human service professionals regarding body modification in hiring practices?" The authors hypothesized professional attitudes would adversely affect the ability of a person with visible body modification (VBM) to find employment. The site of the nonrandom pilot study was in a small Midwestern town. Participants were N = 16 professionals in the human services professions. Survey data was statistically analyzed using frequencies, mean comparisons, and a reliability analysis, but findings did not support the hypothesis. Human service professionals responded that within parameters, individuals with VBM would not be discriminated against. Family study practitioners need to increase awareness that commonly held stereotypes are inaccurate. It is recommended that future research include a larger and more diverse sample to generalize to the attitudes of professionals in other fields.

Society feels sympathy for those who wear their hearts on their sleeves, but for those who wear their hearts on their arms in the medium of ink, society may feel anything but sympathy

~anonymous

In these times of economic uncertainty and increased competition for jobs, employers are able to pick and choose from an ever-growing pool of candidates. One of the common attributes an employer may consider is grooming. According to Foster and Hummel (2000, p. 1), “Physical appearance, as expression of identity, is modified in ways that are regarded as routine and normative; examples include shaving; cosmetics; waxing/electrolysis; hair styling...or extreme and disvalued examples including tattooing; piercing; scarification; branding; body sculpting, such as feet binding or implanting”. Tattoos and piercings that can be viewed or are on typically exposed areas of the body are known as Visible Body Modification (VBM) (Swanger, 2006). The physical risks of tattoos have been well-established, however, a tattooed person also may experience negative social consequences, including negative perceptions formed toward that person because of the tattoo (Resenhoeft, Villa, & Wiseman, 2008). Is there a discriminating attitude regarding visible body modification and hiring practices? The authors reviewed the literature and concluded that there was a gap of knowledge regarding information on how VBM affects employers’ attitudes toward candidates being interviewed for employment. Human services professionals were surveyed regarding their attitudes about hiring individuals with visible body modification and whether the VBM would affect their hiring decision.

Literature Review

The majority of reviewed literature dealt with discrimination related to obesity and racism, with VBM and discrimination appearing for discussion mainly in the legal arena. Many companies do not have specifically-stated policies regarding VBM. There is an overabundance of information on differing attitudes and opinions directed toward those with body art. Most of

the information is biased in either direction without any scholarly base. The studies have shown that people in society react differently to those individuals who have visible body modification. There is an underlying association between VBM and the stereotype of individuals being deviant from the cultural norm, less educated, and of lower intellectual ability. Professionals in the health care field treated modified people in a less caring manner that affected the quality of care given.

Rosenhoeft, Villa, and Wiseman (2008) found that individuals with tattoos can be viewed and classified in an unsavory and harmful way by members of the current social order. Women with large evident tattoos in particular seemed to suffer the most harm when viewed by student participants. Students, divided into control groups and variable groups, were asked to rate physical and personal characteristics of two models. The model seen with an aggressive animal appearing on her arm was reported as possessing considerably more undesirable physical and personal attributes than the same model without a tattoo. In a subsequent experiment, a model without a tattoo was compared to the same model with a smaller and more innocuous tattoo. The results pointed to greater acceptance of the model with the tattoo.

Swanger (2006) attempted to design an acceptable grooming standards instruction booklet to clarify grooming at the worksite. The interview process generally involves a strict adherence to conservative professionalism when interviewing candidates for employment. The study suggests that individuals should have a better understanding regarding companies' view on VBM. This could include how many earrings may be worn per ear, and whether any visible tattoos need to be covered up.

Foster and Humel (2000) believe that VBM is just another aspect of self-expression, when it has historically been associated with negative stereotypes. Individuals with body modification received a label as self-indulgent, abnormal, and coming from a poor socio-

economic background with lower intelligence and little educational achievement. To refute the latter suggestion, some of today's youth are continuing on to gain higher levels of education and obtaining piercings and tattoo procedures. This study suggests that attitudes toward VBM are becoming more acceptable in the current culture, and it is now viewed as just another way of expressing one's self. According to Pitts (2000), Radical Body Modification (RBM) has also become more prevalent, available, and tolerated in the last ten years.

Struppy, Armstrong, and Casals-Ariet (1998) revealed that in previous studies, individuals with visible body modification were viewed as pariahs by health care workers in a society that perceived them as anti-establishment and therefore undesirable as patients and members of the current culture. It can be supposed that this attitude affects not only the care an individual receives, but is also transferred to others in the health care field. In the past, juveniles with VBM were considered delinquents from poor families, while current evidence points to the fact that the younger generation with visible body modification may be academically successful learners. The authors intimate that although prejudicial attitudes continue in the healthcare field and other professional areas, with education and information these views can be altered so VBM individuals are perceived and provided with more effective and compassionate care. Specter (1991) believes that when professionals realize the prejudicial attitudes they carry into the field, they will modify their attitudes and become more accommodating to those with VBM.

There are many articles expressing thoughts on this topic, but little definitive research has been completed on the subject of body modification in employment opportunities. There seemed to be a large gap of general knowledge that specifically targets the discrimination encountered by individuals with visible body modification in hiring practices. We found many articles from the judicial community relating to cases of discrimination and company policies, but little

concerning the current hiring practices followed. We hope to advance the family social science literature by contributing knowledge that will lessen the discriminatory practices directed at those with visible body modification.

Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by the theory of Symbolic Interaction (Strong, DeVault, & Cohen, 2005). Symbolic interaction explores how people experience each other, how they react to each other, and what types of judgment they form about those with whom they are in contact. This theory also looks at interpretation of a person's actions and meaning based on the information that has been gathered through social constructs, personal experiences, and sense of self.

As applied to this study, when people in a society interact, they may draw conclusions about those with whom they interact based on physical characteristics. According to this theory, there may be an adverse reaction from a human services professional who is interviewing potential employees and the candidate who presents himself or herself with body modifications. This reaction may also be affected by the age and gender of the hiring professional and the type of agency. The symbolic interaction theory would predict that equally qualified candidates may be discriminated against because of body modifications.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of the present study was to explore the attitudes of human service professionals regarding hiring practices of individuals with visible tattoos and piercings. We hope to advance the family social science literature by contributing knowledge that will lessen the discriminatory practices directed at those with visible body modification. The central research question was, "What are the attitudes of human service professionals regarding body modification in hiring practices?" According to the literature, we hypothesized that professional

attitudes will adversely affect the ability of a person with visible body modifications to find employment.

Method

Participants

The sites of this study were two small Midwestern towns. Participants were N = 16 (four male and twelve female) professionals in the human service professions. Of those professions, one was for-profit and 15 were non-profit. Five participants were under the age of 30, one was between the ages of 31 and 36, four were between the ages of 37 and 42, and six participants were age 49 or above.

Research Design

The purpose of this research was to identify current attitudes from our sample population and then use that data to generalize about a population of similar professionals in the field of human services. The survey design was cross-sectional, meaning we surveyed attitudes of human service professionals at one point in time. The form of data collection was self-administered questionnaires. The rationale for using this method was that it was the most efficient method to gather data directly in small towns due to the fast pace of our research course, convenience, low cost, and the quick return of data. Our population was human service professionals in both for-profit and non-profit agencies; our sample was composed of male and female professionals located in two different Midwestern towns. The study used a non-random purposive design because our purpose was to gather information from professionals in the human service field. We used nonrandom sampling in order to fulfill our sample target number in a short period of time. The ethical protection of human subjects was provided by completing the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (IRB) training; our study was approved by the IRB.

Data Collection Instrument

In order to address the attitudes of human service professionals regarding hiring individuals with VBM, a survey was designed. The survey included a cover letter with an implied consent form which included a description of the study, definition of any terms not commonly known, risks and benefits, time commitment, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and contact information of the research team and the supervisor, as well as instructions for completing the survey.

The survey consisted of three demographic questions relating to age, gender, and agency status (profit versus non-profit.) Participants were then given eight closed-ended statements based on a 5-point Likert scale which measured the intensity of the respondents' attitudes ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). Questions were informed by our literature and theory regarding what factors relate to attitudes regarding hiring individuals with VBM.

The survey instrument has both face validity and content validity. Face validity was obtained by logically connecting the concept explored with the survey research questionnaire. Because the questions and concepts addressed in the survey were literature-inspired, it was determined that there was a connection between the attitudes of human service professionals, hiring practices and individuals with VBM. Content validity was obtained by covering a breadth of concepts on the survey instrument having to do with hiring individuals with VBM. To increase validity, the survey was piloted to three individuals on a college campus who confirmed that the terms and concepts were clear and understandable. Feedback indicated that the survey was clear and ready for distribution.

Procedure

To collect the data for this study, we approached human service professionals in two small Midwestern towns between October 22, 2008 and November 10, 2008. Our purposive sampling design started with using the yellow pages for the two local communities. We selected agencies that were involved in the human service field. We gathered phone numbers and called to collect e-mail addresses of the individuals responsible for hiring new employees. We then sent out e-mails proposing our survey. We then made follow-up phone calls immediately to those who responded in a positive manner, and scheduled appointments for survey participation. Those who did not respond to the initial e-mail were called a week later to confirm having received it and asked if they were interested in participating in the survey. At the appointment time, the participants were read the implied consent form and instructed to keep the two top sheets for their records. The researcher then instructed the participant to place the completed survey in the envelope provided. The researcher stepped out of the room in order to let the participant complete the survey privately. Completed surveys were placed in a locked compartment at one of the researchers' homes for security.

Data Analysis Plan

The data were first cleaned and checked for any missing data. One survey had missing data and was removed. The cleaned surveys were then coded using acronyms for each variable. The first three items on the survey were demographic variables: age (*AGE*), profit/nonprofit (*TYP*), and gender (*GEN*). Each survey statement was a dependent variable and given an acronym name: "I would hire an individual with visible tattoos" (*VIT*), "I would hire an individual with visible piercings" (*VIP*), "People who have body modification have an increased chance of being mentally ill" (*MIL*), "People with body modification are socially abnormal" (*SAB*), "People with body modification are usually low-income" (*LIC*), "People with body

modification are usually lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered” (*LBG*), “People with body modification are more likely to commit crimes” (*CCS*), “I would give equal consideration to an equally qualified person with VBM” (*EQO*). To analyze the data, the computer program *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)* was used. The individual was used as our level of analysis. Data analyses included frequencies, mean comparisons, and Chronbach’s alpha reliability measurement. Significance testing was not performed due to the small and nonrandom pilot study sample.

Results

All of our variables were subjected to frequency distribution analysis. The majority of respondents disagreed and/or strongly disagreed that people with VBM had an increased chance of being mentally ill, are socially abnormal, are low income, are lesbian- gay- bisexual- transgendered, or more likely to commit crimes. Respondents were undecided whether they would hire an individual with visible tattoos or would give equal opportunity to a person with VBM, and agreed and/or strongly agreed they would hire an individual with visible piercing.

A reliability analysis was run to indicate if our variables were a reliable index to measure our major concept—attitudes towards hiring an individual with body modification. Cronbach’s alpha was computed to be 0.522. This value would increase to .586 if the survey question “I would give equal opportunity to individuals with VBM” was dropped from the survey.

Table 1
Frequency Distribution of Survey Items

Survey Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
<i>VIT</i> : I would hire an individual with visible tattoos	0.0%	6.2%	43.8%	25.0%	25.0%	100.0%
<i>VIP</i> : I would hire an individual with visible piercings	0.0%	6.2%	31.2%	37.5%	25.0%	100.0%
<i>MIL</i> : People with body modification	81.2%	6.2%	0.0%	6.2%	6.2%	100.0%

have an increased chance of being mentally ill						
<i>SAB</i> : People with body modification are socially abnormal	75.0%	12.5%	0.0%	12.5%	0.0%	100.0%
<i>LIC</i> : People with body modification are low income	68.8%	25.0%	6.2%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
<i>LBG</i> : People with body modification are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered	75.0%	25.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
<i>CCS</i> : People with body modification are more likely to commit crimes	68.8%	25.0%	0.0%	6.2%	0.0%	100.0%
<i>EQO</i> : I would give equal opportunity to a person with visible body modification	0.0%	0.0%	37.5%	31.2%	31.2%	100.0%

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics of Survey Items

Survey Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
<i>VIT</i> : I would hire an individual with visible tattoos	3.69	0.95	3.0
<i>VIP</i> : I would hire an individual with visible piercings	3.81	0.91	3.0
<i>MIL</i> : People with body modification have an increased chance of being mentally ill	1.50	1.21	4.0
<i>SAB</i> : People with body modification are socially abnormal	1.50	1.03	3.0
<i>LIC</i> : People with body modification are low income	1.38	0.62	2.0
<i>LBG</i> : People with body modification are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered	1.25	0.45	1.0
<i>CCS</i> : People with body modification are more likely to commit crimes	1.44	0.81	3.0
<i>EQO</i> : I would give equal opportunity to a person with visible body modification	3.94	0.85	2.0

Discussion

Our hypothesis—that professional attitudes would adversely affect the ability of a person with visible body modification to find employment—was not supported by the results.

Professionals in the human services field did not exhibit the predicted attitudes that would hinder people with VBM from gaining employment with their respective agencies. There was a caveat, however. We will discuss each dependant variable in terms of how the results either agreed or disagreed with our hypothesis and also review the qualitative comments. We will then discuss the limitations to the study, the implication for practitioner, and implications for future research.

Our results showed that most respondents disagreed with the statement “People with VBM have an increased chance of being mentally ill.” We interviewed individuals in the human services field who were responsible for hiring new employees for their respective agencies. They disagreed that VBM had correspondence as an indicator of mental illness as stated in Struppy et al. (1998, p.1166), “finding tattoos on a patient indicates...psychiatric disturbance”. The majority of our respondents disagreed that people with VBM are socially abnormal, as stated by Foster and Hummel (2000), that cast body modification as “deviant.” It has become commonplace for professionals to encounter an individual with VBM. According to Swanger (2006, p.76), “The interview process generally involves a strict adherence to conservative professionalism when interviewing candidates for employment”. The majority of our respondents were undecided when given the statement “I would hire an individual with visible tattoos.” According to one respondent, “based on the type of position and population the individual with VBM would be hired for, visible tattoos may not be appropriate to meet the criteria necessary for client comfort.” Survey respondents strongly disagreed that people with body modification are low income. This does not correspond with the literature (Struppy et al., 1998, p.1166), which states stating that

“In the past juveniles with VBM were considered delinquents from poor families...” Our next statement was, “I would hire an individual with visible piercing.” Interestingly, participants responded between agreed and undecided. According to the participants’ general consensus, hiring an individual with many visible piercings located in various positions on or around the face would be based on the employment position applied for and the population with which the candidate would be interacting. The preponderance of responses with the statement, “People with body modification are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered” fell into the strongly disagree category. The human service professionals we surveyed do not hold this stereotype found in the literature as factual. According to Foster and Hummel (2000, p.3), “Tattoos and piercings, as with other forms of body modification, have (had) association with marginalized groups, emphasizing the oppositions of self/other, modern/primitive, gay/straight...”. The survey statement “People with body modification are more likely to commit crimes” was received with ratings of strongly disagree, which does not correspond with the literature from Foster and Hummel (2000, p.2), which implied “correlations between body modification and stigma. Some research casts such practices as...associated with criminality”. When presented with the statement “I would give equal opportunity to a person with VBM,” the majority responded “undecided.” The qualitative comments received stressed the importance of qualifications for the position and the skills shown in the interview regardless of the individual’s status with VBM. However, employment was also dependent upon the position applied for based on the population encountered in the position.

This study is informed by the theory of Symbolic Interaction (Strong et al. 2005), which explores how people experience each other, how they react to each other, and what types of judgments they form about who they are in contact with. As applied to this study, when people in

a society interact, they may draw conclusions about those they interact with based on physical characteristics. According to this theory, there may be an adverse relationship/reaction between a human services professional who is interviewing potential employees and the interviewee who presents himself or herself with visible body modifications. The Symbolic Interaction theory would predict that equally qualified candidates may be discriminated against because of body modifications. The overall personal attitude of human service professionals was one of acceptance in regard to individuals with VBM, although from a business perspective human service professionals needed to safeguard their ability to serve a specific population which may not be as accepting of individuals with VBM. This regard for a client's comfort made some human service professionals consider limiting individuals with VBM to certain positions within their agency. Due to this concern, they are not always able to give equal consideration to with people with VBM.

Limitations

We had a small sample size and we were unable to randomize the survey collection due to time constraints and number of available participants who fell within our sampling parameters. Significance testing was not performed due to our study being a small nonrandom pilot.

Implication for Practitioners

We found that the majority of human service professionals who are responsible for hiring decisions do not personally hold discriminatory stereotypes and would not have any qualms in hiring an individual with VBM if it were not for the consideration they must make to those they serve. Family study practitioners need to increase awareness that many commonly held stereotypes are incorrect and discriminatory. This increased awareness can be discussed with

professionals in other fields. The results showed there is a need to inform society that previously held beliefs, as applied to individuals with VBM, are stereotypes that are inaccurate.

Implications for Future Research

We would recommend that the next step of research be to use a larger and more diverse sample to be able to generalize the attitudes of professionals in other fields. We would recommend that respondents be able to comment on each statement directly after the Likert scale rating has been recorded. We believe it would be more valid to segregate professionals' personal thoughts regarding body modification and the grooming standards that a particular position or agency may require. We considered eliminating the statement "I would give equal opportunity to a person with VBM". This would increase the Cronbach's alpha measurement from .522 to .586. It would also be possible to reword the statement to "I would give equal opportunity to a person with VBM depending on the position applied for".

Conclusion

This subject is important to the family studies field because of the discrimination that may occur to those with visible body modification. Although we found that most human service professionals were personally very accepting of VBM, they must still give special consideration to the clients they serve. The most qualified candidates for a position may be overlooked based on their personal appearance. This may result in a lower quality of care or service. It is our hope that this information can be spread to other professionals in different fields and eventually into the greater society.

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