Tattoos: History, Attitudes And Motivations

In the last few decades, tattoos have become more popular and nowadays more and more people obtain their first tattoo. Based on North American and European researches up to a quarter of the population has at least one tattoo (Mayers, Judelson, Moriarty, & Rundell, 2002; Stieger, Pietschnig, Kastner, Voracek, & Swami, 2010), and Anderson believes, that this prevalence will reach 40% in the next decade (Anderson, 2006). Because of this, there are some beliefs which acceptances are decreasing that say tattoos are primarily a mark of deviant behavior and aggressive people, and therefore tattooers get more recognition as an artist (Swami, 2011). In parallel to the growing popularity of tattoos, the academic scene insured a greater spotlight on the background and judgment of tattoos. Multiple researches can now be found examining the psychological background of tattoos, motivations and personality traits more characteristic of tattooed people (Brähler, Stirn, & Hinz, 2009; Swami, 2012; Jennings, Fox, & Farrington, 2014; Sagoe, Pallesen, & Andreassen, 2017).

The history of the tattoo dates back to the archaic times, especially as we look at the history of Egypt, one of the most impactful ancient civilizations, it provides that 2000 years BC before Christ there were civilizations where tattoo existed, but the oldest prove of the existence of tattoos is from Europe: Ötzi, the mummy from a glacier who lived 5300 years BC has 15 geometric tattoos on his body (Stirn, 2007). Body modifications were basic assets of the rituals of the ancient world, providing information for both the carriers and the community, as different personal decorations give the possibility of changing the skin temporarily or permanently. Therefore, in thousands of years of history, the motivation of the tattoo has constantly changed. Today, this form of body modifications – as well as the piercings – are gaining popularity both in Western societies and in our country, Hungary (Fallah, 2012). In parallel with the increasing popularity of body modification procedures, these methods gained a greater spotlight on different media platforms. More and more magazines and educational series came out and in 2002 the Hungarian Tattoo Association was founded, and in every year worldwide, including Hungary, there are tattoo expos, what the bests of this profession are attending.

Attitudes toward tattooed people

Although some beliefs, like the aggressive, deviant or criminal persons obtain tattoos, are decreasing, it can not be said, that tattooed individuals do not experience stigmatization in the workplace or in everyday life. A study from 2007 revealed, that although a high percentage of college students has a tattoo, most of the respondents perceive, that their parents will object to a visible tattoo, and women were more likely to feel this way (Horne, Knox, Zusman, & Zusman, 2007).

Roberts differentiates the tattooed bodies in the American culture (2012). He says that there is a difference between people who have tattoos and tattooed people. In the first case, it means, that individuals have few tattoos on easily hidden areas of their bodies, therefore, while such tattoos can represent the self, these types of tattoos are not part of the public self. On the other hand, tattooed people obtain tattoos, which are always visible. Therefore, the hiding of tattoos for tattooed individuals would mean to deny one’s true self. Although the number of individuals with tattoos in America has increased, more than 90% of these people can be classified as

people who have tattoos, and probably this limit of the tattooed individuals is because of the marginalization.

A research among college students revealed that women are more likely to have more negative beliefs about the tattoo and their risks (Dickson, Dukes, Smith, & Strapko, 2014). In this research, a positive relationship between the beliefs of the negative side effects of tattoos and Stigma against tattooed persons have been found. However, people, who have a tattooed friend or family member report less stigma against tattooed persons. These findings support the contact theory and provide evidence that stigma is a stereotyping behavior.

Stigma refers to the socially constructed relationship between a socially undesirable attribute and a stereotype. An individual viewed as deviating from the majority in ability, physical appearance, behavior, or health may be avoided or discriminated against based on the stereotypic preconceptions others hold about her (Goffman, 1963). In a study from last year, researchers observed the attitudes toward tattooed individuals (Broussard & Harton, 2018a). In their study, participants had to rate pictures from individuals with or without a tattoo on different characteristics. Originally, they have made pictures from tattooed individuals, and have removed these body modifications later. The participants then rated these pictures on 10 items from the Osgood Semantic Differential Scale, and on 3 other characteristic attributes. Among college students, they have found that they rated both tattooed women and men more negatively than non-tattooed individuals on the characteristic and it appeared among both men, women, tattooed and non-tattooed participants. On the other hand, they perceived tattooed women stronger and more independent. They have revealed that tattooed participants have higher scores in dominance and deviant behavior – alcohol use -, which can be a base of these stereotypes. With a more demographically diverse sample, they have found almost the same results, subjects perceived both women and men with tattoos more independent and stronger, but overall more negatively (Broussard & Harton, 2018b). These findings suggest that the stereotypes may be based more on social perceptions than facts and the widespread and acceptable stigmatization of tattooed individuals may remain regardless of the popularity of tattoos.

Motivations behind obtaining tattoos

In the history of tattoos variable motivations behind this body modification can be found (Buss & Hodges, 2017). In the prehistoric age, it could be used for hiding, and maybe it was evolving from bodypainting. In other cases, religious beliefs were found as the motivation behind having tattoos, like individuals wanted to secure a place themselves in the afterlife and with tattoos it could be demonstrated for the world. In India and Tibet, tattoos help to manage to survive the difficult times of life and the psychical problems could be eased with sensual pain. But the most common function of tattoo is the initiation, and that means that one has reached another period of its life, like from girl turning into a woman, but it can be a signal of any social, religious, sensual or spiritual changes (Scheinfeld, 2007). In some beliefs through tattoos could been got special power, for example, there is a belief, that Vikings obtained some runes as tattoos on their body to free their own resources in battle or to scare the enemy, and this function appeared at the Japanese criminals, in the Yakuza, where the members usually have their whole body tattooed and before battle, they take off their clothes to demonstrate their power through their tattooed bodies (Buss & Hodges, 2017). Tattoos can be used also as to kindle somebody’s sexual interest, in this case, the main goal is to make the body more attractive for

the other sex. But it can express the beliefs of the tattooed individual, like the national identity, patriotism, or just any interest. Also, there is a good idea, in Hungary too, that people, who suffer from diabetes, can obtain a free tattoo on their wrist, in case if they get hypoglycemia, it can help not to mistake it for being under the influence of alcohol, so this kind of tattoo can save a life (Kluger & Aldasouqi, 2013).

There is a research from 2007, which has been revealed 10 motivations behind obtaining a tattoo or a piercing (Wohlrab, Stahl, & Kappeler). A category of motivations is beauty, art, and fashion, and it means, that getting a tattoo is obtaining a piece of art and used as fashionable accessories, so in this case body modification is a way of decoration. Another motivation can be to create or maintain self-identity with tattoos. This means that through the control of the own appearance is the identity created. According to the frequency of this statement in the literature, it is one of the most important motivations behind tattooing. Personal narratives can be behind obtaining a tattoo too. In this case, the tattoos express the personal values and experiences of the individuals. As a research revealed, this motivation can play a role in abused women's life, because it can create another understanding of the abusing and reclaim the control of the injured part of body with the painful procedure of tattooing but it does not mean, that this motivation has a frequent occurrence only in case of abused (Atkinson, 2002). Testing the physical endurance can be a motivational factor too, in this case, individuals are testing their limits through the occurring pain during obtaining a tattoo. For someone, the pain experience, for someone feeling the own toughness or courage is the reason to get a tattoo, and it can display auto-aggressive tendencies. Another line of motivation is to affiliate and commit to a group, and with a tattoo, a person easily can belong to a certain social cycle and make friends. Body modifications can be a form of resistance, especially in adolescence or young adulthood, because it can be a protest against parents or society. Spirituality and cultural traditions or personal affiliation to culture can also be behind tattooing. Not so common, but it can happen, that behind obtaining more and more tattoos there is an addiction, which may be linked with the release of endorphins as a result of the painful stimulations. One of the common motivations is also to express sexual affectations or to bring out the own sexuality through tattoos. The last one, that can be behind a tattoo is an impulsive decision, so it could be, that some tattooed people have no specific reasons behind their body modifications, it is just an impulsive decision or they are under the influence of alcohol or drugs while obtaining a tattoo.

Not only the attitudes toward tattooed individuals are interesting in psychological researches, but the motivations behind obtaining a tattoo. A research revealed that the main motivations behind the body modifications are: "I want to do something good for me" and "I can do with my body whatever I want", these findings suggest, that body modifications express self-consciousness and identity and it can be an expression of the autonomy and the control of one's own body (Stirn, Oddo, Peregrinova, Philipp, & Hinz, 2011).