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## TATTOOED LETTERS AND IDENTIFICATION

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Robert P. Brittain

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The study of finger prints has done much to reduce the necessity for, and even the interest in, other methods of identification. Among these other methods tattooing has an important place, and in, for example, the attempt to identify an unknown body, one might yet be grateful for tattoo marks should no previous record of the decedent's finger prints be forthcoming. In these circumstances, tattooed letters are often looked on hopefully as being the initials of the deceased's name, sometimes too hopefully perhaps. It is the purpose of this brief examination to give some indication of the likelihood of their being so, and thus of their reliability as an aid in practice.

In order to use a method, however, an adequate knowledge of its limitations is a prerequisite, as neglect of them often produces waste of effort, inaccurate results, and the bringing of the method itself into disrepute. The considerable study which has been devoted to tattooing at one time and another has not yet exhausted the subject of all its potential information, and it was thought that some farther scrutiny might prove of interest, although carried out on a very selected population.

Records were examined of all persons arrested by the Los Angeles police in the three-year period up to July 1948 on whose bodies letters were tattooed, and these letters compared with the initial letters of the names by which the arrested persons were known to the police. In most cases only one set of tattooed letters was present, but two sets occurred in some cases and one extreme instance showed as many as eight. For present purposes if the letters in one set corresponded with the initials of the name the other sets were disregarded.

Of the sets themselves, most comprised two letters, and the balance consisted of tattoos of three letters and of single letter

tattoos, with the former predominating. Single letters, even when corresponding with one of the initials of the decedent's name, were counted as not significant on account of the possibility of accidental coincidence.

The criteria used to decide whether there was tally between letters tattooed on an individual and the initials of his name were as follows:

1. At least two of the tattooed letters must be the same as two known initials.
2. Of these, the last of the tattooed letters must be the same as the initial of the surname.
3. Any case with three tattooed letters was considered as a non-tally if any one of these showed a discrepancy with any one of three known initials of the name.

The results of the examination of the records were as follows:

a. Total number of cases checked:		
Males . . . . .	1,531	
Females . . . . .	120	1,651
b. Three letters tattooed tallying with the three known initials of the name . . . . .		259
c. Two letters tattooed tallying with the only two known initials of the name . . . . .		504
d. Three letters tattooed of which two tally with the only two known initials of the name. (The last always coinciding with that of the surname) . . . . .		58
e. Only the last tattooed letter and the initial of the surname tally. . . . .		90
f. Two, or more than two letters tattooed with no tally . . . . .		517
g. Single letter tattoos:		
Males . . . . .	210	
Females . . . . .	13	223

Thus in the gross total of 1,651 cases, without consideration of sex, there is correspondence in 821 (groups b + c + d in the above table) or 50%. After single letter tattoos—223—are excluded, the figures become 821 in 1,428 cases or 57%. Of the 223 single letter tattoos, 210 were in men and 13 were in women. Of the 821 cases which fit, 811 were men and only 10 were women. Therefore, taking sex as a criterion, the fit in men is 811 in 1,321 cases = 61%, and the fit in women is 10 in 107 cases = 9%. The difference is statistically significant. The  $\chi^2 = 107$ . (The  $\chi^2$  was calculated according to Bradford Hill.<sup>1</sup>)

The following factors might have affected the percentages of

1. Bradford Hill, A. *Principles of Medical Statistics*, London, 3rd ed., (1942) p. 93.

fit. Many Christian names are, in practice, used in familiar or diminutive forms which may produce a change in the initial letter. As all possible modifications of names could not be considered, only "B" (Bill, etc.) for William and "B" (Bob, Bert, etc.) for Robert were allowed. Also had all aliases and nicknames been known, a higher fit than that actually found might have been obtained, although in regard to aliases there seems to be a tendency to retain the initial letters of the original names as the initial letters of the alias. Furthermore, if instead of a selected, an unselected population had been investigated (where the incidence of nicknames, and particularly of aliases, is less) one might expect to find a higher fit. Finally, in some cases there may have been misreading of faded or badly formed letters tattooed on the skin, for example, quite often, if a "C" had been read as an "O" or vice versa, or if an "H" had been read as an "R," a tally would have been noted, and again the percentage fit would have risen.

Incidentally, when two sets of letters were tattooed beside each other on a man, the impression was gathered that it was more often the first set which corresponded with the initials of his name.

The smaller percentage of fit in women would have increased considerably had one included what appeared to be an unexpectedly high number of cases where there was a partial fit<sup>2</sup> between tattooed letters and the initials of the woman's name. While chance would account for a few of the fits, marriage is probably the chief factor. It can operate in two ways. Firstly, if a woman has the initials of her own unmarried name tattooed on her body, subsequent marriage, by altering her surname, will usually alter her last initial and so prevent a fit when her new initials are compared with the tattooed letters. Secondly, if a woman has a man's initials tattooed on her body and the man is, or becomes, her husband, then, since she shares his surname, the tattooed initials fit only with the initial letter of her new surname. Whatever the explanation, in women tattooed letters can be of little practical value in matters of identification.

#### CONCLUSIONS

From a study of the criminal population in the Los Angeles area, it is shown that there is an over 60% chance that two or more letters tattooed on a man are the initials of his name. They may thus have a real importance as an aid to identification when

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2. One letter fitting, or two letters fitting but excluding that of the surname.

more direct methods fail. In women, tattooed letters are much less likely to be of immediate assistance. Precisely how far these figures would hold for any other population remains to be determined.

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