



## Cultural Sensitivity and Body Image Programs for Young Aboriginal Women

Courtney R. Petruik, M.A.,  
University of Calgary, Department of Sociology

### INTRODUCTION

We are never hard-pressed to find media images telling us what we need to change about our appearance. They are everywhere – on billboards, in magazines at grocery stores, in pop-up ads when we are browsing the internet, and they may be reified through conversations with friends and family. It is no secret that these images can be harmful. Many individuals consume them and seek to achieve these unrealistic ideals only to find that they are not able to without compromising their health and well-being. It is painful when a person begins to realize that society values something that they cannot embody without going to dangerous extremes. The pain gets worse when not only do they see that their body does not fit the beauty standard, but that their hair type, hair colour, eye colour, and/or skin colour are different. In this article, I explore the strengths and gaps of the existing body image literature as it relates to cultural sensitivity and body image programs for young Aboriginal women and I posit considerations for future directions in this area for research and clinical settings.

### READING WITH A CRITICAL EYE

The current literature focusing on body image among Aboriginal youths is so scarce that we are restricted to summarizing this work as if it speaks about one group, because we need a place to start. However, this cannot be where we stay. In starting this work, I was fortunate enough to talk to community members who identify as

Aboriginal and to clinicians who support people with body image struggles about cultural sensitivity in body image programming. An overwhelming theme in our conversations was that we need to be careful when we make claims about groups. Cultural sensitivity is not an all-encompassing term that means the same thing to everyone. In this context, I argue that in using this term we must recognize that while it is essential to be sensitive to how individuals identify and understand their culture and how this impacts their body image and body satisfaction, it does not stop there. Here, we are using “Aboriginal” as a broad term to include anybody who identifies as Aboriginal. However, within this group there are likely more differences than similarities. It is ultimately offensive to continue making claims about large cultural groups assuming that all experiences are created equal. One individual I spoke to poignantly stated, “We would not assume all white people have the same experience, why do we do this with Aboriginal groups?” We must keep this in mind, keep pushing to broaden our scope of research, and look with a critical eye at claims that apply over-generalizations to large heterogeneous groups.

“We would not assume all white people have the same experience, why do we do this with Aboriginal groups?”

## THE ISSUE

A large study of Canadian Aboriginal youth found that 50% were dissatisfied with their body, and 44% were worried that they were overweight (Story et al., 1994). Aboriginal women report even higher levels of body dissatisfaction, and concerns about obesity (Gittelsohn et al., 1996; Marchessault, 2004; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 1997; Story et al., 1994; Story, French, Resnick, & Blum, 1995). Body dissatisfaction has been associated with poor self-concept, low self-esteem, and poor interpersonal relationships (Furnham, Badmin, & Snead, 2002), making it a considerable concern for the well-being of many women. Unrealistic depictions of beauty in mainstream media adversely influence how young women experience their own body in relation to these images (Hoek, 2007). Idealized images of feminine beauty depicted in mainstream media underrepresent Aboriginal peoples, subject young Aboriginal women to images of bodies that are physiologically different from theirs, and provide an unattainable model of 'beauty'. Body dissatisfaction for young Aboriginal women also extends beyond the desire to be thin – they are taxed with pressures that they are not “white enough” or do not have the “right” hair or eye colour (Fleming et al., 2006). Some scholars have reported that young Aboriginal women may be exempt from negative body image due to cultural buffers that help with resiliency, a positive adaptation despite adversity (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008; Marchessault, 2001), stemming from identification with their cultural background. In contrast, other research identifies that this population may be at greater risk for body image dissatisfaction than their Caucasian counterparts (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2002). Increasingly, positive body image programs aim to equip young women with the tools to combat these pervasive messages about beauty, but despite their potential heightened vulnerability, there is a noticeable and concerning absence of programs that target young Aboriginal women (Franko & Edwards George, 2008; Lester, 2007; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2002). Scholars have urged for the voices of Aboriginal females to be better represented in body image research (Fleming & Kowalski, 2009). To date, no existing scholarship has examined the relationship between body perceptions of young Aboriginal women and their perceptions of beauty, against the backdrop of possible cultural resiliency. As little is known about how mainstream ideologies influence constructions of

beauty for young Aboriginal women, and how cultural influences impact this relationship (Fleming et al., 2006), the cultural sensitivity and effectiveness of existing body image programs is questionable. Indeed, existing positive body image programs have not consulted with young Aboriginal women, nor been designed to meet the needs of this population. With the rise in body image and identity formation problems in North America (Hoek, 2007), and the absence of specific knowledge regarding these concepts in meeting the needs of young Aboriginal women, research that contributes to this knowledge deficit is imperative. Further, meaningful engagement of young Aboriginal women in developing this understanding is critical.

## CULTURAL RESILIENCE

Some studies suggest that strong ties to one's culture can act as a “buffer” against negative body satisfaction (Fleming et al., 2008; Marchessault, 2001). Enculturation is the process in which individuals learn about and identify with their minority culture, and this may act as a protective mechanism that either mitigates the negative effects of stressors or enhances the effects of buffers, decreasing the possibility of negative outcomes (Walters & Simoni, 2002). In some cases, this has shown to be true as many Aboriginal youths have a holistic view of health, connecting body image concerns with broader community issues as opposed to the physiological body (Hodge et al., 2009; Shea et al., 2013; Jette & Blue Roberts, 2016). Spiritual methods and immersion in traditional healing practices may be connected to positive health among indigenous groups (Walters & Simoni, 2002).

Young Aboriginal people may not view their body through a negative lens but perceive it as “good enough” – that is, socially acceptable, but not ideal (Rand & Resnick, 2000; Thompson et al., 2002). In some studies, researchers found that young Aboriginal women perceived the importance of appearance as a marker of worth, but placed more emphasis on personal relationships and inner beauty (Fleming et al., 2006; Jette & Blue Roberts, 2016; Nelson, 2012). Furthermore, if young women associate heaviness (larger bodies) with health then these perceptions may conflict with the dominant discourse of Western femininity and beauty that privileges thinness and thus endorse a view that buffers against negative body image (Jette & Blue Roberts, 2016; Fleming et al., 2006; Fleming & Kowalski,

2009; Willows et al., 2009). However, as mentioned in the previous section, we cannot make wide assumptions about large groups of diverse individuals such as “Aboriginal youths”. Much more nuanced research is required to appropriately make claims about body image issues among culturally diverse individuals.

## LACK OF LITERATURE

Understanding the body and body image is dependent on cultural climate as social constructions of the body vary through history and cultures (Shea et al., 2011). Yet, there is a dearth of academic literature that focuses on Aboriginal groups and cultures and their body image perceptions. In fact, none of the literature incorporates non-weight features of the embodied experience (such as hair, eye, or skin colour) (Fleming et al., 2006) excluding people who fall outside of the cultural majority and therefore do not identify with mainstream ideals of beauty. One study suggests that some Aboriginal youths act to promote their “whiteness” and use this whiteness to incur the privilege that goes along with being white (Jette & Blue Roberts, 2016). More research is needed to explore how Aboriginal youth align themselves with the cultural majority and how this impacts their feelings around their bodies and appearance. In the context of young Aboriginal women and body satisfaction, a wide variety of body-related emotions can be experienced, yet they have not yet been explored (Fleming et al., 2006). Gittelsohn suggests that a good place to start would be engaging in community-based studies that focus on body image concepts, which would facilitate the development of appropriate interventions (Gittelsohn et al., 1996).

## BODY IMAGE PROGRAMS

Many studies have pointed out the lack of culturally sensitive body image prevention and intervention programs (Lester, 2007; Franko & Edwards George, 2008; Rodriguez et al., 2008; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2002).

Of the programs that exist, researchers have highlighted the following aspects as being useful: flexible program design (Shea et al., 2013); emphasis on collaboration and relationship building (Shea et al., 2013; McHugh & Kowalski, 2010; Shea et al., 2011); teaching and counselling that is informed by an understanding of the effects of media, gender, class, and ethnicity (Hellman, 1998; Fleming et al., 2006); conceptual frameworks that address the body-related emotional experiences of young Aboriginal women (Fleming et al., 2006); and “safe spaces” for young women to talk about their concerns and issues (Fleming et al., 2006).

Although there have been developments in cultural sensitivity and body image, such as the Culturally Relevant Figure Rating Scale (Kelly, Bulik & Mazzeo, 2011; Pulvers et al., 2004) and, to a lesser extent, the Cultural Formation Interview in the DSM-5, we still have no studies that focus primarily on developing such scales for Aboriginal groups. Most tools that attempt being culturally sensitive fall short because they assume the same questions are applicable to any culture outside of that which prevails. There are obvious problems with this and more attention to this is required to help rather than alienate individuals who do not fit the narrow mold of the cultural majority.



More research is needed to explore how Aboriginal youth align themselves with the cultural majority and how this impacts their feelings around their bodies and appearance.



## CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

There is room for much improvement in the study and clinical application of cultural sensitivity around Aboriginal groups and their body image perceptions. Based on the literature and suggestions from informal conversations with community members, considerations for moving forward include:

- Exploring the resiliency some cultural groups seem to present, and the meaning of embodiment from a holistic perspective, not just weight and shape;
- Exploring circumstances that place and leave Aboriginal women “at risk” of body dissatisfaction versus other circumstances that protect them;
- Maintaining respect for the diversity within large classifications that we commonly use (i.e. Aboriginal, Indigenous, etc.)
- Engaging communities to develop community-specific interventions;
- Exploring and supporting community infrastructure (healthy food choices, community gardens, parks, sidewalks, etc.) to build and sustain their own programs
- Applying decolonizing methodologies (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999) used in research in clinical settings to help frame interventions. That is, emphasizing the importance of relationship-building, respectful partnerships, holistic perspectives, and a sense of community purpose.

## PERSONAL DISCLOSURE

I am a white female. I started this work because I am interested in the field of body image and body satisfaction. When I began exploring the literature, I noticed a glaring gap around body image and young Aboriginal individuals. I felt compelled to pursue this work in to shed light on how important it is to continue discussing diversity and body image with respect to young Aboriginal people. I started by connecting with people I knew in the community, in the academic world, and in health settings and there was a clear common thread became – the discussions are too quiet. My work here is not intended to be formal research at this point, but rather it is the start of an explorative awareness activity to help promote discussions around this issue.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to personally thank the individuals who came forward to speak with me about this work. You shared very personal stories and incredible insights and I can only hope that I was able to put them forward in a way that honours your intention. I would also like to thank all of those who pursue this difficult and important work. Lastly, I give thanks to NEDIC for inviting me to contribute to the Bulletin. I hope that people who are personally closer to this subject can continue this conversation so that we can build and nourish our knowledge and awareness in this area.



**NEDIC Helpline (416) 340-4156 or Toll-Free 1-866-NEDIC-20**  
**Monday to Friday 9am–9pm EST**

Through our programming, campaigns, and national toll-free helpline, NEDIC is committed to prevention, building awareness and ensuring that people no longer suffer in silence.

## REFERENCES

- Edwards George, J. & Franko, D. (2010). Cultural issues in eating pathology and body image among children and adolescents. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, 35,3,231-242.
- Fleming, T., Kowalski, K., Humbert, M. Fagan, K., Cannon, M. & Girolami, T. (2006). Body-related emotional experiences of young Aboriginal women. *Qualitative Health Research*, 16, 517-537.
- Gittelsohn, J., Harris, S., Thorne-Lyman, A., Hanley, A., Barnie, A. & Zinman, B. (1996). Body image concepts differ by age and sex in an Ojibway-Cree community in Canada. *Journal of Nutrition*, 126, 2990-3000.
- Jette, S. & Blue Roberts, E. (2016). 'We usually just start dancing our Indian dances': Urban American Indian (AI) female youths' negotiation of identity, health, and the body. *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 38,3,396-410.
- Marchessault, G. (2001). Far from ideal: *Talking about weight with mothers and daughters from Winnipeg, Southern Manitoba and a First Nations community*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from the National Library of Canada.
- McHugh, T. & Kowalski, K. (2009). Lessons learned: Participatory action research with young Aboriginal women. *A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health*, 7,1,117-131.
- McHugh, T. & Kowalski, K. (2010). 'A new view of body image': A school-based participatory action research project with young Aboriginal women. *Action Research*, 9,3,220-241.
- Neumark-Sztainer, D. Croll, J., Story, M., Hannan, P., French, S. & Perry, C. (2002). Ethnic/racial differences in weight-related concerns and behaviors among adolescent girls and boys: Findings from Project EAT. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 53, 963-974.
- Neumark-Sztainer, D., Story, M., Resnick, M. & Blum, R. (1997). Psychosocial concerns and weight control behaviours among overweight and non-overweight Native American adolescents. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 97, 598-604.
- Shea, J., Poudrier, J., Chad, K. & Atcheynum, J. (2011). Understanding the healthy body from the perspective of First Nations girls in the Battlefords Tribal Council Region: A photovoice project. *Native Studies Review*, 20, 1, 27-57.
- Shea, J., Poudrier, J., Thomas, R., Jeffery, B., Kiskotagan, L. (2013). Reflections from a creative community-based participatory research project exploring health and body image with First Nations girls. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 272-293.
- Stevens, J., Story, M., Ring, K., Murray, D., Cornell, C., Juhaeri, & Gittelsohn, J. (2003). The impact of the Pathways intervention on psychosocial variables related to diet and physical activity in American Indian schoolchildren. *Preventive Medicine*, 37, S70-S97.
- Walters, K. & Simoni, J. (2002). Reconceptualizing Native women's health: An "Indigenist" stress-coping model. *American Journal of Public Health*, 92,4, 520-524.