

was not in our initial criteria, the two young women in this study were the only teenaged Aboriginal women living in their respective communities at the time of the interviews. To protect their identities, both young women chose pseudonyms (Andrea, Dana) that have been used to report the findings from this research.

Prior to participating in this study, Andrea had lived in her rural community of approximately 400 people for less than a year, and reported that approximately 10 other young women her age live in her community. Andrea explained that she lives in a “foster home” and that she had recently moved from her home in a nearby rural community that had more Aboriginal people. She also explained that she was planning to “move back home” after she finished the current school year. When asked to describe her physical appearance she said, “I am really short...and I am darker than most of them [other women her age], actually all of them.”

Dana, on the other hand, grew up in a community of about 800 people that includes about 20 other young women her age, and in at school that has “a lot of different kinds of people.” Despite being the only Aboriginal woman her age, and one of the few young women with dark hair and skin, she explained that her relatively small community is quite multicultural. As well, she noted that some nearby communities have larger populations of Aboriginal Peoples. When asked to describe her physical appearance she said, “I am kind of tall... and it’s not like I am a perfectionist and look at my body all the time and think its perfect, but it’s okay. I don’t go on extreme diets or anything and try to be super skinny, but I accept it.”

Data Collection

After obtaining informed consent from both participants and their respective parent/guardian I, the first author, engaged in a one-on-one semi-structured interview with each participant. Because I am first author and the facilitator of the participant interviews, I offer a brief description of my personal background so that readers may better understand my research perspective. I am a young, privileged, white woman who grew up in a middle-class neighbourhood in Eastern Canada. Although my family is small, it is quite ethnically diverse and includes Aboriginal Peoples. When I first began researching women’s body-related experiences, I was surprised to find so few Canadian research studies that include Aboriginal women. Through experiences I have had within my family, I have learned to recognize and respect the diversity of all women, and my experiences motivate and guide me through my research journey.

Individual interviews were used because they allow researchers to enter into a participant’s perspective, with the assumption that it is meaningful (Patton, 2002). Stake (1995) says that interviews are important for case studies because the topic being investigated will be seen differently by everyone; thus, interviews are one of the best ways to better understand multiple realities. Each interview was conducted at a convenient time and location for the participants; in this case during school hours in private rooms at the participants’ respective schools. Questions that explored the participants’ body-related experiences were asked (e.g., How do you feel about your body? When do you feel most comfortable with your body?), and the semi-structured nature of the interview provided participants with opportunities to share experiences that may not have been specifically solicited by the researcher. Each interview took approximately 90 minutes, and was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researchers.

Data Analysis

Consistent with thematic analysis, Stake’s (1995) guidelines for case study data analysis were utilized, beginning with a general review of typed transcripts. Participants signed transcript release forms that stated they would have an opportunity to review their interview transcripts and final reports and to add, alter, or delete information from the documents. Neither participant made changes, affirming that the transcripts and final report accurately reflect their experiences. We (i.e., both researchers) adhered to Stake’s suggestion to use direct interpretation and categorical aggregation to search transcripts for meaning. We looked through the transcripts for single instances of meaning (i.e., direct interpretation) and then searched for issue-relevant meanings by looking for a collection of instances (i.e., categorical aggregation). The meaning units derived were then grouped together to form themes (Stake, 1995). The words of the participants are used to support each theme, all four of which are presented in the following section.

RESULTS

The purpose of this study is to better understand the body-related experiences of two young Aboriginal women living in rural Canadian communities. While both young women indicated their general sense of satisfaction and acceptance of their bodies, it is important to provide further detail of their experiences to ensure that their stories are adequately represented. The four themes that emerged from the interviews are: (1) fitting in, (2) rural uniqueness, (3) role models, and (4) body talk.



Fitting in

Both participants have dark hair and dark skin, and each participant described her thoughts about whether she “fits in” or “blends in” with the other, predominately white, people in her community. Despite some similarities, the young women’s experiences of fitting into their communities are quite different. Andrea explained that “there is hardly no Aboriginal people around here...and there’s not really anything traditional here that we would do. We just do everything like they [non-Aboriginal people] would do, not us.” As well, she said that she has lived in her community for less than a year and “most of the people around here I don’t know, and it scares me because they always look at me and I really don’t know them.”

Andrea’s belief that she looks different than others in her community shed light on the difficulty she feels in fitting in. Andrea said that she does not like to wear shorts or skirts, and in highlighting the reasons for this explained, “most of my friends they don’t have tans, and they always say that I have a natural tan ...and they always wonder why I am really, really dark.” She said that her friends know she is “Native” but, she laughingly explained, that they still “see who can be the darkest.” In further addressing the issue of feeling scrutinized by others, she said that she would likely feel more comfortable living in a town with more Aboriginal people because then she would “blend in.”

Dana, who has lived in her community for her whole life, presented a story highlighting her perceived acceptance in that community. She said, “Sometimes I wonder if I will fit in or not but... I’ve grown up with these kids since I was really young.” Dana often used terms such as “we” and “us” to describe her experiences, and it became apparent in the interviews that there is a strong sense of belonging in her class. She explained that almost everyone in her class grew up together and that, “it’s not like our class is trying to impress anybody. It’s just like acceptance, we just like accept everybody for who they are.” In providing a deeper explanation for why she perceives that her classmates exhibit such acceptance she explained, “cause there are a really a lot of different shapes of girls in our class. Like a really big difference.” The acceptance and sense of belonging described by Dana is attributed to her belief that she “fits in” to the community.

Rural uniqueness

The young women also shed light on how rural community characteristics influence their body-related experiences. Andrea said that it probably would not matter if she lived in a city or in her rural community, and how she feels about

herself would “probably be the same.” Although she did not envision herself feeling differently about her body if living in a city, she thought she would feel more comfortable if living on a reserve. She said, “if you went to a reserve, it would probably be all Native kids.” Thus, she anticipates that her experience might be different if she could “blend in” with other people who also have dark skin.

Somewhat contrary to Andrea’s experience, Dana anticipated that her experiences would likely be very different living in a city. She perceives that young women present themselves differently in urban and rural communities and that how young women feel about their bodies depends on where they live. She said, “well, I notice that girls in the city do dress different than people here... the new brands and stuff, but the people on the farm [her community] will just get something local.” She also noted that cities have more “cliques and stuff,” and that young women in cities “are probably like, ‘oh I have to dress like this person.’” She suggested that there is probably more pressure in cities to look a certain way, “because it [the city] is more accessible in terms of the clothes and stuff like that, and the latest thing.” She said that her small class is comprised of people who all look different, in terms of styles and overall appearance. She even joked that “if we went to the city, we’d be weirdos.” To Dana, her friends in her rural community are far more accepting than individuals in cities.

Role models

Both participants described how the role models in their lives impact the way they - and other young women - feel about their bodies. Although one might initially think of role models as individuals living in the same communities (e.g., parents, siblings), both participants explained that young women often view individuals in the media as role models. Andrea remarked that young Aboriginal women’s experiences with their bodies are probably influenced by magazines. She explained that young Aboriginal women may have negative experiences with their bodies because the “beautiful” women depicted in magazines “never look Native,” and that they never have dark hair and dark skin. Thus, Andrea appeared to have a very clear notion of what Native women look like. Building on this belief she said, “You don’t see very much African American women in magazines, it’s all on white girls, and there is no Native kids, I never see none.” She further explained that many young women do not feel good about their bodies because “they don’t have the greatest role models.” Andrea explained how she is lucky because she has “a whole bunch of different role



women's experiences. The young women in this study, for example, share the common characteristic of being the only teenaged Aboriginal woman in their communities. As available researchers interested in working with young Canadian Aboriginal women in similar rural situations is sparse, the stories of these two young women help to shed light on this overlooked population.

Also highlighted by these stories is the importance of role models in young women's lives, including the power attributed to media. One participant expressed her concerns that depictions in the media are mostly of white women and never of Aboriginal women. The concerns expressed by this participant are consistent with the views of Blood (2005) who explains that our media dominated culture perpetuates the notion that a woman's body is her best attribute and that she should be able to present the idealized norm of white, thin, toned and flawless. Consequently, a woman's body is in the control of strong powers that impose constraints and obligations. Blood further argues that young women who perceive themselves to fail at achieving "normal" visual standards inevitably experience feelings of inadequacy with respect to their bodies. The potential harm in the messages that young Aboriginal women get from the media underscores the importance of the participants' suggestion that other young women be engaged in body talk so they can learn to deconstruct the media messages.

Ethical Challenges

As well as highlighting the body-related experiences of two young Aboriginal women living in rural communities, this research also sheds light on some of the ethical challenges we encountered engaging in research in rural communities. We highlight these challenges not because we have solutions, but because others might benefit from hearing our story. As our study is unique in that we worked with two young Aboriginal women who are the only teenaged Aboriginal women living in their respective communities, the remainder of this paper will focus on the challenges we faced ensuring participant confidentiality.

Throughout this research we found ourselves examining our many responsibilities as university-based, non-Aboriginal researchers trying to engage in respectful/ethical research. Because of the far-reaching impact of colonization on research institutions, Aboriginal Peoples have asked for new standards of ethics that "speak to the multiple responsibilities of researchers and institutions" (Battiste, 2002, p.34). As a result, various Aboriginal scholars (e.g., Battiste, 2002; Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Bishop, 2005; Harrison, 2001; Smith, 1999, 2005), as well as various

organizations and committees (Canadian Institutes of Health Research Ethics Office, 2005; First Nations Centre, 2007; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP], 1996), have developed ethical guidelines for individuals engaging in research with Aboriginal Peoples. Because concepts of respect or ethics have been previously defined by western sensibilities, the above-mentioned researchers, organizations and committees have drawn upon the expertise of many Aboriginal Peoples in the development of their guidelines (Smith, 2005). While all researchers must adhere to ethical guidelines, as previously mentioned, our focus is on guidelines specific to participant confidentiality.

For Aboriginal Peoples, consent is often about credibility and trust, which, because of its dynamic nature, must be constantly negotiated (Smith, 1999). Smith (1999) explained how the process of consent is not simply an ethical procedure in which the participants tick a box; rather it is a process of negotiation in which researchers must continually engage. Although the participants and their respective parent/guardian signed consent forms prior to their interviews, I (the first author and interviewer) also conversed with the young women about consent before, throughout and after their interviews. The participants and I negotiated the manner in which we could ensure their anonymity, and the precise manner in which their personal stories would be shared with the academic community.

Although the process of consent was negotiated, the small rural communities in which the interviews were conducted presented many challenges with respect to the process of confidentiality. Both participants chose their schools as the interview location, and upon arrival at each school I was greeted by many welcoming school members. Along with friendliness, most individuals (particularly the teachers) showed considerable curiosity about why I was there, making it difficult to hide that I was there to speak with the only Aboriginal woman in each school. Nevertheless, the young women requested that the interviews take place at their respective schools and it was important to respect their requests.

It was also important to negotiate with the participants about the manner in which their stories would be shared. The participants and I agreed that their names and the names of their communities would not appear in any publications or presentations that derived from the interviews. This posed a new challenge, as most guidelines for research with Aboriginal Peoples (e.g., Smith, 2005) state that researchers must ensure that communities are benefiting from the research. How could we ensure that the community benefits from the research while being unable



to present the community with any final documents because such sharing would jeopardize the confidentiality of the participants? Recognizing their unique situations, the young women agreed to participate in this study because they want their stories to be heard by other health researchers. Guidelines (e.g., Battiste, 2002) state that Aboriginal Peoples should have control of their own knowledge; respecting participants request for confidentiality is an expression of that respect for control over their own knowledge.

CONCLUSION

The two stories presented here highlight the need for future researchers to engage more young Aboriginal women living in rural communities in conversations about body-related experiences. The voices of young Aboriginal women, and of young rural Aboriginal women in particular, are noticeably absent from the body literature. The diverse stories of the two participants in this research underscore a need for future researchers to explore the commonality and uniqueness of these stories. Given how many young Aboriginal women live in rural Canadian communities, many more stories need to be heard. Young women are the experts of their experiences and we must not continue to overlook the power of their voices.

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