# Body-related experiences of two young rural Aboriginal women

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### ABSTRACT

There has been a gradual increase in health research that explores the body-related experiences of young Aboriginal women living in urban and reserve settings. However, the voices of rural Canadian Aboriginal women not living on reserves, appear to be absent from this literature. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to better understand the body-related experiences of young Aboriginal women living in rural Canadian communities. Case study was utilized as the strategy of inquiry in which each of two young women (both 15 years of age) represented a case. One-on-one interviews were used to explore the young women's experiences. Four themes emerged: (1) fitting in, (2) rural uniqueness, (3) role models, and (4) body talk. The primary contribution of this study is that it sheds light on the unique body-related experiences of two young women, each living in a rural community where she is the only teenaged Aboriginal woman. Despite some similarities, the young women related very different stories of their experiences in their respective communities.

This research also highlights some of the ethical challenges of ensuring that the stories of the young women are adequately represented, while their confidentiality is respected.

## **KEYWORDS**

Young Aboriginal women, health, rural, body-related experiences, Canada

## INTRODUCTION

Since 1990, there has been a steady increase in obesity research among Aboriginal Peoples (e.g., Gruber & Ponton, 1995; Hanley et al., 2000). While there is a concentrated focus on the "obesity epidemic," Marchessault (1999) argued that there is much less focus on body image concepts and the concerns that some Aboriginal youth have about their weight. Although researchers have highlighted the link between body image concerns and health among the general population (Harter, 1999; Leary, 1995), the voices of Aboriginal women are rare in this literature. Even rarer in body literature (i.e., research focused on body image) are the voices of rural Canadian Aboriginal women.

In the United States, large scale surveys (e.g., Cummins, Ireland, Resnick, & Blum, 1999; Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Resnick, & Blum, 1997; Story, French, Resnick, & Blum, 1995; Story et al., 1994) have included objective measures of American Indian adolescents' body image, and such studies highlight an overwhelming sense of body dissatisfaction among their participants. However, few researchers have explored Canadian Aboriginal Peoples' body-related experiences. Studies that include Canadian Aboriginal participants have typically utilized quantitative methods (e.g., Gittelsohn et al., 1996; Marchessault, 2004), and have usually included individuals living on reserves (e.g., Gittelsohn et al., 1996). Overall, and similar to previous American research, Canadian studies suggest that young Aboriginal women are dissatisfied with their bodies. While such quantitative research has been helpful in drawing attention to concerns that Aboriginal women may have with their bodies, Marchessault (1999) argues that these studies suggest nothing new but that qualitative research about Aboriginal Peoples' experiences with their bodies are just "newly studied."



National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO) Organisation nationale de la santé autochtone (ONSA) bရCГ مدئك أنه الحكم فأصواحيك المكاكمة الأد Our previous research (i.e., Fleming et al., 2006) was one of the first Canadian studies to focus exclusively on Canadian Aboriginal women's body-related experiences. Four young women participated in this study and one of the primary contributions of the research is its suggestion that Aboriginal women's body-related emotional experiences might be more positive than previous research has indicated. We attributed our findings partially to our case study approach in which we used voice-centered methods (i.e., focus group, one-on-one interviews) that supported the young women in describing their complex body-related experiences.

While our research has highlighted the experiences of urban Aboriginal women, the voices of rural Aboriginal women are still absent from body literature. The young women involved in our previous research suggested that concerns with their bodies impact their overall health. It is important to explore rural Aboriginal women's body experiences, because as the Ministerial Advisory Council on Rural Health (2000) stated, the health of people living in rural and Aboriginal communities is poorer than that of urban dwellers. In light of the current gaps in the body literature, the purpose of this research is to better understand the body-related experiences of young Aboriginal women living in rural Canadian communities.

# Significance of the Study: Addressing Recommendations

In a detailed report on rural, remote and northern women's health, Sutherns, McPhedran and Haworth-Brockman (2003) recommend several future research priorities; our research addresses three of these recommendations. First, this research sheds light on the health of rural women in Canada. Sutherns et al. argue that the health of rural women in Canada is typically overlooked by researchers. Our research has produced one of the first studies that provides a sole focus on rural Canadian women's bodyrelated experiences. Second, this research sheds light on the health of a specific rural population. Working with young Aboriginal women addresses a current gap in the body literature. Third, our research adheres to Sutherns et al.'s suggestion to use more "interactive methods" to better understand women's experiences. The one-on-one interviews used in this study serve as a starting point for a broad exploration of rural Aboriginal women's experiences.

## METHODS

Case study was the qualitative method of inquiry used in this study. As suggested by Stake (1995), case study supports the complexity and distinctiveness of a case. He explains that people are often cases of interest and that researchers are interested in them not only for their uniqueness, but also for their commonality. Reinharz (1992) argues that the power of a case study comes from its capacity to clearly convey the dimensions of individual life or social phenomena. This is a collective case study in which two young Aboriginal women helped to provide insight into the body-related experiences of young Aboriginal women living in rural Canadian communities.

### PARTICIPANTS

The two participants who took part in this study selfidentified as Aboriginal women, and were both 15-years-old at the time of their interviews. After we obtained ethical approval from our university's Behavioural Research Ethics Board, we recruited participants through a known sponsor.

The known sponsor, identified through our social network because of her strong ties with young women in rural prairie communities, was approached with a short list of selection criteria for the participants. The intent was to interview two to four self-identified Aboriginal women between the ages of 14 and 18 who live in rural Canadian communities. The strength of case study research comes from the depth of the information obtained from each individual rather than from the breadth of individuals involved; Creswell (1998) asserts that case studies involving multiple individuals typically involve a maximum of four cases. Because research suggests that adolescents are particularly vulnerable to body image disturbances, our goal was also to work with adolescent women (Levine & Smolack, 2002). For identification of a rural community, we adhered to Statistics Canada's (2003) definition of rural and remote communities that are removed from the services and resources of urban areas and have populations of less than 10,000 people. Finally, we chose to include young women who self-identified as Aboriginal, since this term encompasses individuals who identify as legal or status Indian, non-status Indian, Inuit, and Métis (National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2007).

The young women who participated in this study self-identified as Aboriginal and, similar to the women who participated in Lawrence's (1999) research, use the terms Aboriginal and Native interchangeably. Although it



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 audiorecorded 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 issuerelevant 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 bodyrelated 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



models," including her guardians, siblings, and friends who are both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

Andrea's sentiments are echoed by Dana who said that young women need good role models in their lives. She noted that women's body-related experiences are often influenced by "a comment said to them by a teacher or an acquaintance, or by their parents or their siblings." Dana also said that celebrities often serve as role models for young women: "the family and the media has a lot to do with it [body-related experiences]. Like the one girl is in love with all of the celebrities and stuff." Dana illustrated this with a portrait of a girl in her class who is constantly "reading about Paris Hilton." While Dana acknowledges the powerful role of media, she does not think that media images impact negatively on Aboriginal women.

#### **Body talk**

Both young women explained that, despite their general feelings of satisfaction towards their bodies, it is important to put more focus on talking about the body. Andrea said that if people spent more time talking about the body or worked together to implement programs, "it [programs] would probably help you to see your body and how you think about your body." She continued that it might help young women if their teachers talk more about their body-related experiences. She said, "You see your teachers everyday at school and if they talk to you about body image, you get to know more about that and what it can do to you."

Dana also emphasized the importance of engaging in body talk. She said, "In health class we don't really learn about it [body-related experiences] very much...but now with the media, and the way people look, I think it really is a big deal. I think they [teachers] should teach it. Focus on it more than what they do." In her health class, "we don't go in great detail about it [body-related experiences]." Dana also mentioned that she and her friends did not talk much about the body. She said, "we never really talk about that [body]". She continued, "personally I don't think it is [a problem], but I think it is a big problem for like young girls, everyone." That is, while she feels okay about her body, she recognizes the social value of being encouraged to engage in conversations about the body.

## DISCUSSION

This research highlights the unique stories of two young women as well as shedding light on some of the ethical challenges of trying to ensure the participants' stories are adequately represented, while their identities are kept confidential.

#### **Two Unique Stories**

Consistent with our previous research with young Aboriginal women living in urban centres (i.e., Fleming et al., 2006), the two young women who participated in this study described a general sense of satisfaction and acceptance of their bodies, a finding that is somewhat inconsistent with previous quantitative research (e.g., Gittelsohn et al., 1996; Marchessault, 2004) that explored body shape perceptions of Canadian Aboriginal women. However, quantitative research has not provided Aboriginal women an opportunity to share their experiences. As suggested by Sutherns et al. (2003), we moved beyond the participants' reports of satisfaction and provided a forum in which they could describe the complexity of their bodyrelated experiences. As the young women described how their body-related experiences are often influenced by the context of the situation (e.g., comments made by their role models), general reports of "body satisfaction" appeared to oversimplify their experiences.

While both young women described a general level of satisfaction with their bodies, their stories suggest many complexities, some of which emerged when the young women spoke about "fitting in" to their communities. Despite both having dark hair and dark skin, the extent to which they think about "fitting in" differs. Their stories suggest that "fitting in" or "blending in" to their communities is based primarily on one's appearance. Lawrence (2004) explained that "Nativeness" often depends on how one is defined by others and in white society it is largely dependent on how one looks. For Andrea, it seemed that her "Nativeness" meant that she did not "fit in" to her community. Her experiences echo those of a previous research participant who said, "the belonging...how we can never be like white people" (Fleming et al., 2006, p. 526). Dana, in contrast, does not perceive that her looks separate her from her community. We speculate that the length of time each young woman has spent in her community has influenced the extent to which she feels she belongs or "fits in."

Andrea and Dana's stories also suggest a uniqueness among rural communities that influences their body-related experiences. Such findings are consistent with the general health literature that suggests that the geographical and sociocultural characteristics of rural communities influence women's health (Sutherns et al., 2003). Other factors (e.g., ethnicity, class, gender) also add to the diversity of women's experiences (Collins, 1986; Olesen, 2000). While it is important to highlight diversity, we believe that it is also important to highlight the common themes that often link



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 bodyrelated 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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