

Summary

This article highlights an innovative action research project that required the researcher to build trusting relationships with high school-aged Aboriginal women. A core group of young Aboriginal women developed action initiatives to support opportunities to discuss body image experiences. Some of the actions were also designed to raise awareness about the issue beyond their own communities.

Key Terms

Body image generally refers to how an individual feels about or perceives their physical appearance and how they feel they are perceived by others. More broadly, it can relate to one's overall sense of self, including physical attributes.

Action research generally combines research goals and the practical concerns of people. Action research often involves group discussions and critical reflection at each stage of a project, to encourage as much participation as possible from the people or community involved.

Alberta Centre for Active Living
11759 Groat Road
Edmonton, AB T5M 3K6
Phone: 780-427-6949
Alberta toll-free: 1-800-661-4551
active.living@ualberta.ca
www.centre4activeliving.ca

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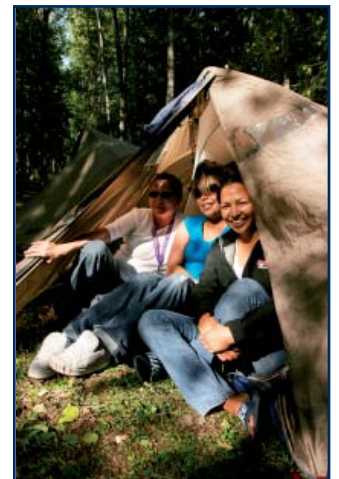


Addressing Aboriginal Women's Body Image Through a School-University Partnership

**Tara-Leigh McHugh, PhD, University of Alberta
Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation**

Background

Researchers have highlighted the link between concerns about body image and health among the general population (e.g., Fox, 1997; Leary, 1995). However, few researchers have explored the body image experiences of young Aboriginal women. The limited research that does exist indicates that young Aboriginal women experience body image dissatisfaction (Gittelsohn et al., 1996; Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Resnick & Blum, 1997; Story, French, Resnick & Blum, 1995). More recent research indicates that the body image experiences of young Aboriginal women are very complex and influence health in a variety of ways. Subsequently, young Aboriginal women have voiced the need for action (Fleming et al., 2006).



Purpose

This school-based, participatory, action research project was conducted in partnership with a local high school. It was designed to provide young women (primarily young Aboriginal women) with an opportunity to manage their body image experiences.

Participants

Students, teachers and staff of Nutana Collegiate, a high school in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, participated in this project. The project took place over a 10-month period from September to June. All Nutana school members were welcomed to participate and many were involved in the various action initiatives. A core group of seven young Aboriginal women were primarily responsible for developing and implementing all action initiatives.

Research Processes

It quickly became clear that the results of the research were best represented by two phases: Phase 1, Building Relationships, and Phase 2, Action.

Building Relationships

I spent nearly four months in the school working to build relationships with students and staff. With rare exceptions, I spent five days a week, from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., trying to

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integrate myself fully into the Nutana school community. Looking back, it is clear that three primary processes fostered the development of relationships with school community members: (1) Familiarization, (2) Making Connections, and (3) Giving Back.

More specifically, becoming familiar with both the physical and social aspects of Nutana was a critical first step for me in this relationship building process. As well, I established connections with teachers and staff who were interested in supporting the goals of this research and with young Aboriginal women who could potentially become involved. Finally, I worked to "give back" to the school (e.g., writing grant applications, supporting fundraising initiatives) so that students, staff and teachers could see how much I appreciated their welcoming me so readily into their school. My commitment to these processes supported my initial goal of developing trusting relationships with community members. This trust formed a strong foundation for the development of effective and successful action initiatives.

Action

The action initiatives emerged in a number of different ways. Typically, the students generated suggestions for proposed action. However, staff, teachers, researchers and the media also provided ideas. The core group played a critical role in developing and implementing the following eight action initiatives:

- Girls' club
- Yoga
- School wellness policy
- Body talk sessions
- Writing group
- Art group
- Creating media awareness
- Youth facilitation of provincial health conferences

The Action Phase was the most important contribution of this study. As the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) stated, Aboriginal youth want to develop skills and capacities that will help them manage the challenges facing their communities. This project supported young Aboriginal women in developing action initiatives at the individual, school, provincial and national level. At the individual level, young women met weekly at lunch time for girls' club that provided opportunities for healthy eating and engagement in various physical activities. Monthly body talk sessions provided a safe environment for sharing body image experiences. The school wellness policy supported changes such as adding healthier options to vending machines and providing more opportunities for physical activity. Finally, we created awareness at a national level when the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) highlighted our research during a national news broadcast.

Conclusions

Researchers continually present alarming statistics on the large number of young women who have concerns about their bodies. Nevertheless, few young women are given opportunities to work with researchers to manage these concerns. This project is an example of how young Aboriginal women, school communities and researchers can benefit from working together on projects aimed at effectively managing body image experiences.

About the Author

Dr. Tara-Leigh McHugh is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation at the University of Alberta. She was hired by the University in July 2009 to play a pivotal role in the new joint degree in Aboriginal Sport, Recreation and Community Development that will soon be offered by the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation and the Faculty of Native Studies. McHugh completed her M.Sc. and PhD in Kinesiology at the University of Saskatchewan, and a Postdoctoral Fellowship at Dalhousie University.

In the field of health and community development, McHugh has research expertise in Aboriginal peoples' body image, physical activity, and the use of community-based action research approaches. She is committed to engaging in collaborative and respectful research with Aboriginal peoples from urban and rural communities. She recognizes the importance of honouring participants' authority in decision-making processes, and works with participants to ensure that research findings are easily accessible to Aboriginal communities.

