Young Canadian Aboriginal Women’s Feelings about their Bodies

Few research studies have focused on the body-related emotional experiences of young Aboriginal women. Previous studies show that many of these young women are dissatisfied with their bodies (Gittelsohn et al., 1996; Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Resnick, & Blum, 1997; Story et al., 1994). However, this research has limitations: most studies focus on American youth, are interested primarily in negative emotions such as body dissatisfaction, and have used survey or questionnaire data to generalize to larger populations.

METHODOLOGY
My Master’s thesis focused on the body-related emotions of young Canadian Aboriginal women. Four women participated in this qualitative case study: three identified themselves as Aboriginal (one 14-year-old, two 18-year-olds) and one 18-year-old who identified herself as non-Aboriginal. Although I intended to only include Aboriginal women, the participants all belonged to a mentorship group for young women who had faced adversity. The participants and I saw this non-Aboriginal woman as an integral part of this group.

I collected data over several phases: two rapport-building phases to learn about each other and build trust, two focus groups, four one-on-one interviews, and an art project. I followed Stake’s (1995) guidelines for case study analysis.

STUDY RESULTS
Five themes emerged from my study.

1. Conflicting Cultures
Participants saw Aboriginal culture and urban white culture as conflicting. Some participants mentioned the difficulties of moving between their urban residence and their home reserve. Referring to the urban community where she goes to school, one participant explained: “I find that a lot of people are really white around here. They’re all concerned about their weight and everything, but out on the reserve you can stuff your face and nobody would care.”

2. The Need to Belong
The women all felt it was important to belong to a community. As one participant stated, “belonging [is an issue, because…] we can never be like white people.”

Another participant who had moved from a predominantly white city area to another area with more Aboriginal people commented: “we moved to my side [of the city], to more Native people… then finally I got to be around my own people…I was more comfortable and more happy.”

3. Personal Identity
Participants also noted the importance of personal identity. As one said, “I stopped thinking about trying to be like everybody else and I just started to conform into my own body, you know, started fitting my own body.”

4. Journey to Acceptance
Although participants were generally happy with their bodies, they saw this as the result of a personal journey. When I asked how they became satisfied with their bodies, one explained, with agreement from the others: “just accepting it… having to look at yourself every day in the mirror, and you either fall into this deep depression of hating yourself or you just say ‘screw everybody. Why am I going to let them [society in general] make me hate myself?’”

5. The Body Affects Everything
Participants felt that the body affects everything (or, at least, other aspects of their lives). As one participant said, “the body affects so much more than people think; like it’s unbelievable. If we could all as a society get past the body-thing.” The other women felt that we would all be better off if society focused less on the body.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS
The participants were generally satisfied with their bodies, a finding inconsistent with most previous research. Although these participants may be part of the reportedly small percentage of Aboriginal women satisfied with their bodies, this study allowed participants to reflect on their emotions’ complexity and context-specificity.

For example, participants recognized the difficulty of living up to Aboriginal images when these conflicted with dominant urban images. Furthermore, although participants wanted to belong to a group or a community, they knew that they were different. However, despite adversity, participants demonstrated confidence and autonomy (two traits associated with resiliency).

This study raises the question of why some young women seem to be “okay” given the significance of body issues to young women in general. We also need to find out whether this group's body-related emotions are common among a larger population of young Aboriginal women.

Future researchers need to work towards change. As one young woman suggested, “there should be young people’s groups, like an organization. Have rallies towards freedom of body and then all these other young people would see it.” She proposed a public place where young women would not have to care about their bodies. Heilman (1998) identified schools as possible sites—educators can help instil confidence, especially among young women.

Researchers interested in the body-related emotions of young Aboriginal women may want to partner with schools, especially when working towards change. Tara-Leigh Fleming, MSc, University of Saskatchewan (taraleigh.fleming@usask.ca), with Kent C. Kowalski, PhD. The Canadian Institutes of Health Research funded Tara Fleming’s Master’s program through SPHERU’s Community and Population Health Research Training Program (www.cphr.ca).