

## **Through their eyes: Perceptions and Realities of the 'healthy' body in Female First Nation Youth in Saskatchewan**

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### **Context: Obesity Epidemic in Canada**

In Canada there has been a proliferation of discourses regarding rising rates of overweight and obese individuals. As a result, there has been great concern about potential health problems that accompany increases in weight (Tremblay, et al., 2005). Aboriginal peoples are specifically targeted as an at risk group for developing obesity. Based on Tremblay *et al's.* (2005) study of BMI rates among Canadians, both Aboriginal men and women were found to be at the highest risk for being obese; furthermore this risk was doubled in comparison to other ethnic groups. In addition, Aboriginal people have been found to be at an increased risk for the development of atherosclerosis and cardiovascular disease in comparison to other Canadians (Anand, et al., 2001). While Aboriginal youth are seen as being at an increased risk compared to other Canadian youth, Willows (2003) argues that we lack substantial information and research to make this conclusion. Thus, in order to gain a sufficient understanding of this issue, she states that we are in need of community based research that examines weight through a complex understanding, as meanings of healthy weight vary culturally (Willows, 2003). Furthermore, Poudrier and Kennedy (2008) contend that understandings of weight must go beyond the biomedical causes of obesity to encompass the larger socio-cultural influences.

Issues of weight have become central both in the media and popular culture; youth are often at the centre of this concern. While youth have rights as citizens, they have little say or influence on the institutions that impact them (Wyn and White, 1997). Youth are considered a vulnerable and often weak group, and are viewed as "being an at risk population" (Lupton, 1999). This lack of influence and voice can be applied to notions and meanings of the healthy body in their own lives. In regards to female Aboriginal youth, the issue of culture is also an important consideration. Insights about

the ways in which young women learn and read cultural and educational messages and form their own understandings of the healthy body will assist physical educators and health promotion professionals in designing programs and learning strategies that will be both favored by and beneficial to youth.

Strongly related to the obesity 'epidemic' is the current heightened concern over diabetes. Aboriginal people in Canada are seen as being at an increased risk over other groups; Aboriginal women are viewed as being at the greatest risk (Kelly & Booth, 2004). Youth are also seen as being at risk of developing type 2 diabetes, a strain which before the "obesity epidemic" was believed to be observed only in adults; once again this risk is seen as higher for Aboriginal youth (Barton, *et al*, 2005). In addressing issues of Aboriginal health, it is important to adhere to their values and culture, rather than prescribing proper health behaviours (Barton, *et al*, 2005). Aboriginal perspectives about health and wellness are often seen in terms of balance, harmony, holism, and spirituality rather than in the Western medical sense of physical dysfunction and disease within the individual. Some authors suggest that Aboriginal health should be understood in terms of a medicine wheel, a holistic wheel consisting of four quadrants or components of health: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual; to be healthy there must be harmony between the four aspects of the wheel (Waldram, *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, energies would be better distributed in helping these communities deal with this problem, rather than directing the gaze of surveillance (Fee, 2006).

### **Research Project**

The research that I am currently carrying out is a community-based study that incorporates a photovoice project undertaken by female First Nation youth in the Battleford Tribal Council (BTC) region, Saskatchewan, Western Canada. In this study, I explore the ways in which these youth negotiate different meanings of health and the body guided by their words and stories. 20 female participants have been recruited, ranging in age from 13 to 16 years, originating from seven First Nation reserves which are part of the Battleford Tribal Council. Research questions that guided the study include: How do female Aboriginal youth interpret body weight and body-image? What are the social, historical, visual, and cultural meanings of weight for youth in this

community? What are the barriers and strengths faced by youth in regards to weight and body image? This research has been informed by feminist and sociological theories of the body.

### **Methodology & Methods**

In order to understand the meanings and concerns that youth attach to weight, I have used a participatory research methodology. My goal is to create knowledge with the youth regarding issues of body image and body weight, knowledge that will begin to shed light on the complexities of these issues (Wahab, 2003). As such, this research will be community oriented and use the method photovoice. Participatory research and its use have become more common in recent decades. This approach has many positive aspects, for example increasing the role of agency and participation within the community (Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). As such, I feel this is a suitable approach to the topic I have chosen to explore.

Photovoice is a method used for participatory research, in which participants take photographs that enable others to see their world through their eyes (Wang, 1999). Photovoice has three main goals: “1) to enable people to record and reflect their community’s strengths and concerns 2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through large and small group discussion of photographs 3) to reach policy makers” (Wang & Burris, 1997, p.370). Through the gathering of pictures, the youth are able to raise their own questions and share their opinions of healthy body weight and body image as experienced in their own community (Wang & Pies, 2004). These photographs will likely prompt individual reflection and act as an important empowering tool. As well, photovoice can increase the involvement of participants and enable them to be more entrenched in the research process (Carlson, *et al*, 2006; Wang & Pies, 2004). Deacon (2000) notes that a “focus on the creativity of participants in turn incorporates them more fully into the research process” (p. 9).

Photovoice presents an innovative approach to involving traditionally marginalized groups and communities, through discussions their communities concerns and possible solutions are proposed (Wang & Burris, 1997). Historically, Aboriginal people have been subjected to much intrusive research from the outside; this colonial

approach did nothing to benefit Aboriginal peoples. In a report by Ermine, Sinclair & Browne (2005) for the Indigenous Peoples' Health Research Centre, the Aboriginal elders interviewed stressed the importance of both community based approaches and the future for community youth. Youth are an integral part of the both the community and in learning and maintaining traditional knowledge taught by elders (Ermine, Sinclair & Browne, 2005).

### **Photovoice analysis**

Following the photovoice method as outlined by Wang (1999) and Wang and Pies (2004), analysis for this method consists of three components. Because this method was designed as a participatory research approach, the components for analysis are constructed with group interaction in mind. The first stage of analysis involves the choosing of photographs (Wang, *et al.*, 1998). In regards to a group research project, this involves choosing the photographs that best represent the concerns and ideas of the group, community or individual. Ideally in this phase of analysis the discussion will be led by the participants themselves (Wang, 2005). The second phase of analysis includes storytelling and contextualizing (Chio & Fandt, 2007). Once again this process is envisioned as a group project. The group would get together and discuss the significance of the photographs through group discussion and sharing of personal experiences/stories (Meyer *et al.*, 2004). The final phase of analysis consists of codifying issues, themes and theory that arise from the photographs (Wang, 2006). In referral to my research this coding will be done by myself and shared with participants to get their feedback.

It is particularly important to explore youth's perspectives of weight and obesity, as their voices often go unheard. This project will make a valuable contribution to the literature through increasing our knowledge of female Aboriginal youth's perceptions of the healthy body, and specifically how they understand healthy body weight and body image. The research consists of photovoice project, individual interviews, focus group discussions and a community event. Participants for the research reside in reserves in the Battleford Tribal council region. Data collection began in December 2008. Motivation for completing the research includes increasing knowledge in this area through the words of

youth. Additionally, community leaders and health portfolio workers are very interested in hearing the voices of youth.

### **Current work**

The research process began on December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2008, consisting of a one day community event. The event included meals, a group discussion, the Photovoice project and art projects, individual interviews and a bowling outing to conclude the day. Interviews provided a good balance between the group discussion and the ability to contribute a private/personal piece to the research. This time was used to discuss the photographs, their meanings, and motivations for capturing their images in greater detail. The interviews also provided the participants an opportunity to discuss additional issues or ideas they may have regarding body image and healthy body weight. Individuals were also given the option of taking more photographs beyond this day using a disposable camera. The photographs will later be developed and additional interviews will be completed to incorporate any new photos. For my presentation I would like to share some photographs taken by the youth, and briefly discuss some of the emerging themes.

#### Photovoice: themes about health

##### 1) *Healthy Foods:*

- Healthy foods were seen as being very important to ones health. In the first picture the participant is in the grocery store in the vegetable aisle. She noted that a lot of colors means your eating healthy, and gives the thumbs up in the picture
- In the second picture (shows three girls in the meat section at the grocery store) the participant that took this noted the importance of eating meat and used anorexic girls as someone that did not and talked about the importance of meat to diet and the functioning of your body. This was knowledge that had been passed down from her grandmother.

##### 2) *Unhealthy Foods:*

- A number of the girls choose images such as these (pictures were of fast food chains in the area such as McDonalds). The participant who took the picture of the onion rings in particular noted “look at all the grease on the plate its so gross”

##### 3) *Community*

- The first image is of a police car. This picture was interesting in that 2 participants used it but it represented different meanings. One participant viewed the police as negative and noted that they were racist and said “they think their pudding on the

plate”. Whereas another participant saw them as a positive force in that they keep the community safe.

- Participants also took pictures of the hospital and always referred to it as a positive presence in that it maintained health in the community

#### 4) *Maintaining a healthy lifestyle*

- Many noted the importance of physical activity on health and there were many pictures of participants engaging in activity (pictures shows participant exercising on elliptical machine)
- Not smoking was seen as major way to keep healthy. The participant that took the picture of this poster noted “that’s me I’m smoke free” (poster was a local health promotion item featuring teens).

#### 5) *Relationships*

- The first picture is a group shot of some of girls that participated that day. Many were happy to be at this event and have the opportunity to meet youth from other communities. Suicide was seen as a big issue and one girl in particular noted that those who commit suicide are feeling alone so forming relationships is important to health.
- The final picture is also used to highlight the importance of relationships. The participant that took the picture of this statue saw it as a mother and her children out for a walk.

In late February 2009, I will return to region to complete focus groups with the youth and discuss the manner in which we will share our findings with the community. Focus groups have proven to be valuable tools for health researchers (Wilkinson, 1998). These groups will be an ideal method to learn about the opinions of a particular group through their own words. It is my goal that through these groups the youth and I can work toward the production of knowledge regarding issues of healthy body weight and body image. Given that this research is in its preliminary stages, transcription of interviews is still ongoing. This project will be concluded by a community event in which the youth can share their pictures and findings with community leaders and members. The goal of the event is to create dialogue among community members, and identify important themes and future directions that can be taken in the provision of health and wellness for youth in these communities. Photovoice has great empowerment potential in that it works for individuals who traditionally lack voice or under-represented in research (Wang &

Burris, 1997). Through group dialogue and discussion of everyday life and struggles individuals strengthen community ties and the feeling of shared experience. Photovoice presents researchers with a powerful tool, one that can invoke change, increase community ties and agency, and provide empowerment.

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