

Exploring the Meaning of the ‘Healthy Body’ with Aboriginal Women: A Community Based Research Project

Authors: Jennifer Poudrier and *Janice Kennedy

Rationale: Obesity and its associated health risks have been identified as areas of concern for Aboriginal women. While there is a burgeoning literature which focuses on biomedical causes and consequences of obesity and diabetes, there is little known about the cultural, visual, gendered and historical meanings of healthy body weight and healthy body image from the perspective of Aboriginal women. There is also little understood about *embodiment*, or the powerful intersections between the physical body and the socio-cultural experiences of it.

Objective: It is essential to explore the broader meaning of the ‘healthy body’ from the perspective of Aboriginal women and its connections to embodiment. Context and Community Partnership: Our community based participatory research takes place within the Battleford Tribal Council (BTC) Region, Saskatchewan, Canada. In 2004, we established a research team comprised of BTC community members, the Director and health care staff of Battleford Tribal Council Indian Health Services (BTCIHS) and a university researcher. BTCIHS is a First Nations owned and operated health services organization that provides health services to seven, primarily Cree, First Nations communities near the urban centre of North Battleford. In 2005, our team held a community sharing circle with women from different communities to seek guidance about the path of our work. Main Results: We were able to identify three inter-related themes connected to better understanding the ‘healthy body’ including: 1) the importance of Elder knowledge in community wellness; 2) the importance of understanding the broader (historical, cultural, gendered and visual) context of the healthy body; and 3) the need to better understand food security and health programming. Conclusion: In order to enhance community health programming, it is essential to understand embodiment or the way in which women experience and give meaning to the ‘healthy body.’ In the next phase, we will employ photovoice, a qualitative and participatory research tool where women will use photography, sharing circles and a community display to share their knowledge about the ‘healthy body.’ With this work, we anticipate that women will develop new programs and suggest improvements in health care practices, policies and programs offered through BTCIHS.

Affiliations: Janice Kennedy - Director of Battleford Tribal Council Indian Health Services, North Battleford SK, Canada; and Jennifer Poudrier PhD. Department of Sociology, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon SK Canada

Corresponding Author: Jennifer Poudrier, jennifer.poudrier@usask.ca