



## Body image importance and body dissatisfaction among Indigenous Australian adolescents

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### Abstract

Despite their elevated risk of health problems and a propensity to be more overweight or underweight relative to the other members of the Australian population, there has been no previous investigation of body image concerns among Indigenous Australians. In this study we investigated the level of body image importance and body image dissatisfaction among 19 rural Indigenous adolescents (7 males, 12 females) and 28 urban Indigenous adolescents (15 males and 13 females). Our hypotheses that there would be gender differences in body image importance and body image satisfaction were not generally supported. However, males placed more importance on muscle size and strength than females, and rural participants placed more importance on weight than urban participants. Comparison to existing data obtained from Caucasian adolescents suggested that Indigenous youth may be less concerned and dissatisfied with body weight and shape. These results are discussed in relation to findings from studies of non-Indigenous adolescents, and Indigenous health issues. The limitations of the current study and the need for further studies are also discussed.

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In developed countries such as Australia, a thin body ideal is strongly promoted for females (Stice, 1994). Adolescent girls and young adult women particularly are thought to experience a strong sociocultural pressure to be thin, resulting in a high degree of body weight or shape dissatisfaction (McCarthy, 1990; Stice, 1994; Wertheim, Paxton, Schutz, & Muir, 1997). For males, the muscular mesomorph ideal is also very clear (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001). This muscular

ideal is intimately tied to cultural views of masculinity and the male sex-role, which prescribe that men be powerful, strong and efficacious (Mishkind, Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1986). Consistent with these findings, other research (Moore, 1990; Nowak, Spear, & Crawford, 1996) has suggested that boys are concerned more with their chest, shoulders and arms, and that girls are concerned more with their hips, thighs and legs.

While body dissatisfaction was considered in the past to be largely restricted to Western societies, more recent findings challenge this assumption. For example, studies of minority ethnic groups have produced

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evidence of “acculturation” effects on eating and weight-related factors (Ball & Kenardy, 2002; Brevis, McGarvey, Jones, & Swinburn, 1998). Lee and Lee (2000) have argued that as non-Western women become more acculturated to Western society, they become more susceptible to sociocultural influences from the media and peers that promote the thin female ideal. Exposure to these influences is associated with increased concerns about body image, and an increase in eating disordered behavior or other behaviors to change the shape of the body. Similarly, Thompson, Corwin, and Sargent (1997) found that about equal proportions of White and Black children in the United States reported weight concerns. About half of the sample of Black and White girls in this study wanted to be thinner. Thirty-two percent of Black boys compared to 28% of White boys also wanted to be thinner.

Little research has been conducted to examine the nature of body image attitudes and related behaviours among Indigenous people. One study of obesity among Indigenous Canadian children (Hanley et al., 2000) included measures of body image. Among girls, but not boys, an inverse relationship was found between being overweight and the heaviness of the healthy body image selected by the participants. In another study of Native American children, Stevens et al. (1999) found that 38% of children had tried to lose weight, most commonly through exercising. Girls were more likely than boys to be dissatisfied with their body size, with 48% desiring a slimmer body, and 22% wanting a larger body. This is in contrast to findings among Caucasian girls, where girls want to lose weight, and the desire for a larger body is generally not relevant (Thompson et al., 1997).

In Australia, although it is known that non-Indigenous children and adolescents have a high degree of concern about their body image (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003a, 2003b), little is known about this issue amongst the Indigenous Australian population. This population (410,000 people or 2.2% of the population, Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2002), is the most disadvantaged group in Australian society (Hunter, 2000). In fact, Hunter suggested that Indigenous Australians are far more disadvantaged than both non-Indigenous Australians and other Indigenous populations in similar situations in other countries (e.g., Canada, USA, and New Zealand). This is particularly the case with regard to both physical and

mental health, areas in which the Indigenous population has significant unmet needs (Hunter, 2000).

One aspect of physical health that is of concern among Indigenous people is their level of obesity. Indigenous people across the lifespan are more likely than non-Indigenous people to be classified as obese. For example, Indigenous children between the ages of 7 and 15 years are more likely to be categorised as overweight, and less likely to be classified as being of acceptable weight, compared to Australian reference data (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs, 2000). Although the figures vary by location, overall 22% of girls and 24% of indigenous boys are overweight, compared to 15% of girls and 15% of boys in the Australian reference data. However, Indigenous people are also more likely than non-Indigenous people to be underweight. For example, 28% of both Indigenous boys and girls are underweight, compared to 15% of boys and 15% of girls in the Australian reference data.

Despite the higher risk of overweight and underweight among Indigenous people, the ideal body size among them has not been investigated. Little is known about how Indigenous people think about their own body size/shape in relation to their own (or Western) ideals. This important area was explored in the present study. On the basis of previous work with non-Indigenous people, we hypothesised that girls will attach more importance to, and will be more dissatisfied with weight, shape, hips, thighs and legs, and boys will attach more importance to, and will be more dissatisfied with muscles, chest, shoulders and arms.

It is important to note that there is great diversity among Indigenous communities in Australia. Some communities live a substantially traditional lifestyle in remote areas (for example, central Australia, and the Kimberley region in the far north of Western Australia), while others are located in large cities and have adopted many of the customs and practices of the mainstream society. In between the traditional cultures and those adopting European culture, are communities that live in more rural areas, sometimes on reserves or as fringe-town dwellers. However, as Dudgeon and Oxenham (1989) argued, such a simplistic depiction of Indigenous communities is inappropriate, as it fails to capture the multi-dimensionality and dynamic interaction between communities, and indeed of people's tendency to move between them. In this study, we de-

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