1-1-2009

Acculturation and the body image of Alaska Native Women

Travis Williams
George Fox University

Rodger K. Bufford
George Fox University, rbufford@georgefox.edu

Nancy S. Thurston
George Fox University, nthursto@georgefox.edu

Kathleen Gathercoal
George Fox University, kgatherc@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gscp_fac

Part of the Clinical Psychology Commons

Recommended Citation
Williams, Travis; Bufford, Rodger K.; Thurston, Nancy S.; and Gathercoal, Kathleen, "Acculturation and the body image of Alaska Native Women" (2009). Faculty Publications - Grad School of Clinical Psychology. Paper 31.
http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gscp_fac/31

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School of Clinical Psychology at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - Grad School of Clinical Psychology by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfc@georgefox.edu.
Introduction

Historically, Alaska Native women have struggled with efforts on their traditional ways of existence as they handle the acculturation process by the presence of American culture. Often, the Alaska Native women have interpreted these struggles as problems and they have been treated as such. People from the dominant American culture have attempted to resolve the problems so as to minimize the negative aspects for Alaska Native women as they handle the acculturation process. There has been a significant amount of research on drinking and alcoholism in Native American and Alaska Native populations. This body of research has shown that the prevalence of alcoholism is much higher among Native Americans than in other cultural groups (Hamilton, 1996). Glass (1995) suggests that incorporated Native Americans in Alaska have much higher levels of acculturative stress than non-incorporated Native women. They view themselves as having more problems than others and feel ashamed of themselves and their lives (pp. 104-105). The stress that develops from this acculturation process, particularly for Native-American populations, has manifested itself in many dysfunctional behaviors.

While there has been a significant amount of research on culture and body image and their integration, very little has been done on the impact Native American culture has on the body image of minority cultures. This is particularly true for minority cultures, such as Alaska Native, that have had American culture thrust upon them with little resistance. The fact that little research has examined this population demonstrates the need to shed light upon these cultures. The goal of this study was not to determine which culture is right or wrong in its perspective on body image perception. Rather, the intent was to highlight any differences in body image perception. This study explored the possibility that there is a difference in how Natives and Non-Natives perceive their current body image.

Method

Participants

Participants were 30 female Alaska Native women, ages 18-35, who were solicited at the Southcentral Foundation Dental Office, the Alaska Native Heritage Center, and downtown Anchorage, Alaska. The Alaska Native sample involved several different Native groups: Athabaskan, Inupiaq, Yup’ik, and Alutiiq. The second group, which served as the majority-group, was a sample of 30 non-Native respondents from the same age range. This group was solicited from downtown Anchorage, Alaska. The participants ranged in age from 18-35 years (M = 23.64; SD = 5.101). The Native Alaskan participants ranged from the ages of 18-42 (M = 24.43; SD = 5.94). The Non-Native Alaskan participants ranged from the ages of 18-35 (M = 22.79; SD = 4.68).

Instruments

Body Image Assessment - Obesity (BIA-O) (Williamson, Davis, Bennett, Gomory, & Gleaves 1969). The primary purpose of the BIA-O is to assess body image. Eighteen different silhouettes of a female body were shown to the participants. These silhouettes depicted bodies ranging from underweight to overweight, and the participants were asked to indicate which silhouette most closely resembled them (1) the current body size (CBS) and (2) the ideal body size (IBS). The CLI (in Hamilton, 1996) is a 29-item, multiple-choice measure. The intent of this measure is to identify the level of acculturation of the participant based on five dimensions of acculturation. These dimensions include: (a) intra-cultural affiliations, (b) extra-cultural affiliations, (c) cultural identification and (e) cultural emphasis on slenderness for women. The CLI is a self-report measure that was used to determine the level of acculturation of the participant based on five dimensions of acculturation. Three dimensions include: (a) intra-cultural affiliations, (b) extra-cultural affiliations, and (c) cultural emphasis. This is a valid and reliable tool for the purpose of this study.

Procedure

The participants recruited through the Southcentral Foundation Dental Clinic received a survey packet during their lunch break. The participants at the Native Heritage Center as well as from downtown Anchorage were approached and asked if they were willing to participate in the study. The White participants were also approached in downtown Anchorage and asked if they were willing to participate in a survey.

Results

The results of this study found no difference in how Native and Non-Native participants perceive their current body sizes as measured by the BIA-O. Essentially, this suggests that both groups of women have similar perceptions of their current body appearance. However, the results also suggest that there is a significant difference in how the Native and Non-Native women envision their ideal body size. The Native group of women preferred an ideal body image that is taller than their current size while the Non-Native group of women preferred a body similar to their current size. Finally, the results indicate that there is some correlation between the level of acculturation and Native women's current body size and the discrepancy between Native women who are more connected to their traditional Native culture versus those who are more acculturated to Western societal norms versus their current body size as smaller than those Native women who are more connected to their traditional Native heritage. Likewise, the more acculturated to Western societal norms a Native woman finds herself, the smaller the discrepancy will be between her current body size and her ideal body size.

Conclusions

The results of this study support the thoughts of Orland and Gerbke (2001), who suggest that people play an important role in teaching girls cultural beliefs. They believe that if one is to interfere with this social learning theory, family members and peer groups can insidously teach girls to emulate standards for women's (p. 27). The fact that Alaska Native women tend to have a larger ideal body image avowes to imply that, for the Alaska Natives, the influence of family is stronger than the mainstream media. However, the acculturation process was found to be significantly correlated between CBS and BIS, (r = -0.10, ns). Regression of the CLI orientation scores on the discrepancy between Current Body Size scores and Ideal Body Size scores for the Native Alaskan group was not significant. In a simple regression Western orientation entered as a significant predictor of body size discrepancy among Alaska Native women (CLI, (F1, 28) = 4.804; p = .041; R2 = .376; R2 = .143) (p = .376).

Abstract

This study examined the way acculturation affects Alaska Native women's body perception. A secondary goal was to establish an understanding of interactions of native peoples with the majority society. Little research has been conducted regarding the ways in which indigenous people are affected by societal norms, although much research has been conducted focusing on how Native people groups are affected. It was hypothesized that the way that the Alaska Native women were socialized into the culture, the more likely they were to have a similar body image to that of the majority culture. It was also hypothesized that if the level of acculturation is a predictor in ideal body image for the Alaska Native women. The purpose of the study was to determine if the more acculturated Alaska Native women to Western culture, the more likely their perceived ideal body image and the body shape closest to their own body image. The Native Alaskan group was also asked to fill out a Cultural Lifestyle Inventory (CLI) which assessed their level of acculturation. The scores on the CLI and the bio image comparison were then correlated. The results indicated a significant difference in how Native and Non-Native women perceive their ideal body size. Therefore, Western acculturation appears to be a significant factor into body image. This suggests some adherence to the majority culture by the Alaska Native women living in urban settings.