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# Acculturation and the Body Image of Alaska Native Women

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## 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 identified how immigrant people groups are affected. It was hypothesized that while the ideal body image of both cultures may be similar as a result of adherence to cultural norms, the Alaska Native sample would be more accepting of their bodies than the White Alaskan sample. It was hypothesized for this study that the more acculturated Alaska Native women to Western culture, the more likely they would be to have a similar ideal body image to that of the majority culture. This study used two sample groups, one Native Alaskan women and the other White Alaskan women. Both sample groups were asked to use the Body Image Assessment – Obesity (BIA-O) to measure their perceived ideal body image and the body shape closest to their own body image. The Alaska Native group was also asked to fill out a Cultural Lifestyle Inventory (CLI) which assessed their level of acculturation. The scores on the BIA-O and the CLI were then compared to determine if the level of acculturation had an effect on the body images of the Alaska Natives. Further, the Alaska Native group's BIA-O scores were compared to the White Alaskan sample group to determine if there was a difference in perceived ideal body image between the groups. The results suggest there is a significant difference between how Alaska Native women perceive their ideal body types and how White women perceive their ideal body type. There is also some suggestion that the level of acculturation is a predictor in ideal body image for the Alaska Native women. Therefore, Western acculturation appears to be a significant determinant of body image. This suggests some adherence to the majority culture by the Alaska Native women living in urban settings.

## Introduction

Historically, Alaska Natives have struggled with effects on their traditional ways of life caused by the presence of American culture. Often, the Alaska Natives have interpreted these struggles as problems and they have thus been treated as such. People from the dominant, American culture have attempted to resolve the problems so as to minimize the negative aspects for Alaskan Natives 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 incarcerated Natives in Alaska have much higher levels of acculturative stress than non-incarcerated natives, "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 North American culture has on the body image of minority cultures. This is particularly true for minority cultures, such as Alaska Natives, that have had American culture thrust upon them without their choice. The fact that so 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. 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 Whites perceive their current body image.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 30 female Alaska Natives, ages 18-35, who were solicited at the Southcentral Foundation Dental Office, the Alaska Native Heritage Center, and in downtown Anchorage, Alaska. The Alaska Native sample involved several different Native people groups: Athabascan, Inupiat, Yu'pik and Aleut. The second group, which served as the majority-group or White sample consisted of 28 participants, of the same age range. This group was solicited from downtown Anchorage, Alaska. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 35 years ( $M = 23.64$ ;  $SD = 5.091$ ). The Native Alaskan participants ranged from the ages of ( $M = 24.43$ ;  $SD = 5.84$ ). The Non-Alaskan Native participants ranged from the ages of ( $M = 22.79$ ;  $SD = 4.09$ ).

### Instruments

Body Image Assessment - Obesity (BIA-O) (Williamson, Davis, Bennett, Goreczny, & Gleaves 1989). The primary goal 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 (1) which silhouette was the closest to their own body shape, or current body size, (CBS) and (2) which they considered to be their ideal body shape (IBS) Cultural Lifestyle Inventory (CLI). The CLI (in Hamilton, 1996) is a 29-item, multiple-choice measurement. 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-family language, (b) extra-family language, (c) social affiliations and activities, (d) cultural familiarity, and (e) cultural identification and pride. A demographic questionnaire was developed to gather descriptive demographic information including age, gender, family structure, employment status, occupation, education, ethnicity, and Native heritage (specific tribal affiliation).

### 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

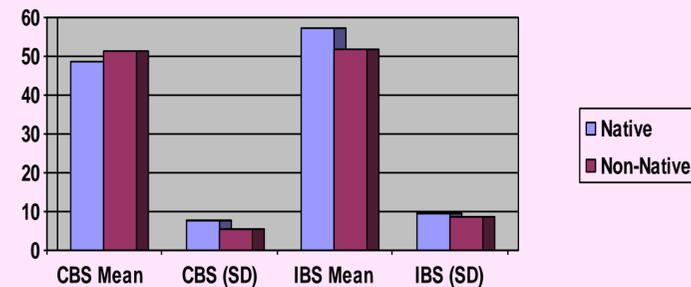
No significant difference was found in the BIA-O Current Body Size (CBS) mean scores for Native and Non-Native respondents ( $t(56) = -1.37, p = .17$ ). When the level of acculturation was examined for Alaskan Native women, no correlation was found between CBS scores and scores on the Cultural Lifestyle Inventory for the Native women ( $r(30) = .05, ns$ ; Cohen, 2003, p. 343). This result does not provide support for the hypothesis that the level of acculturation is a factor in how Alaska-Native women in Anchorage perceived their current body images. A significant difference was found when comparing the reported Ideal Body Size (IBS) of Native and Non-Native women. Native women reported a significantly higher IBS mean score than the Non-Native respondents ( $t(56) = 2.14, p = .04$ ). As with the CBS, the Native women's ideal body image is not significantly correlated with level of acculturation,  $r(30) = .07$  (Cohen, 2003, p. 343). When the respondents' current body size and their ideal body size were compared, it was found that the Native respondents perceive their bodies to be smaller than their ideal body size. The Non-Native respondents, on the other hand, reported very little discrepancy between their ideal and their perceived body sizes. These results were significant ( $F(1, 56) = 8.22, p = .006$ ). A small and non-significant correlation was found between the level of acculturation for the Native women and their reported difference between CBS and IBS, ( $r(30) = .10, ns$ ; Cohen, 2003, p. 343). Regression of the CLI orientation scores on the discrepancy between Current Body Size scores and Ideal Body Size scores for the Native Alaskan sample was significant. In a stepwise regression Western orientation entered as a significant predictor of body size discrepancy among Alaska Native women ( $F(1, 28) = 4.604; p = .041; R = .376, R^2 = .141; \beta = .376$ ).

## Conclusions

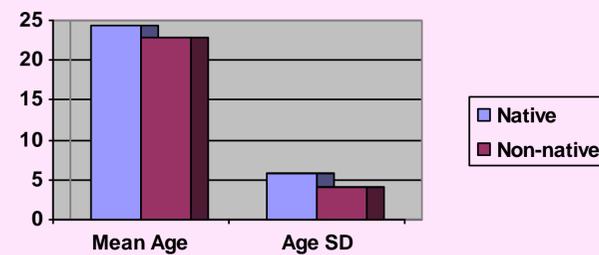
The results of this study found no difference in how Native and Non-Native women participants perceive their current body sizes as measured by the BIA-O. Essentially, this suggests that both groups of women have similar perceptions of their current bodily appearance. However, the results also suggest 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 larger 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's current body size and what they perceive to be their ideal body size. Here, we see that Native women who are more acculturated to Western societal norms view their current body sizes 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 between her current body size and her ideal body size.

The results of this study support the thoughts of Dorian and Garfinkle (2001), who suggest that families play an important role in teaching girls cultural beliefs. They believe if one is to follow the social learning theory, "family members and peer groups can intensify the socio-cultural emphasis on slenderness for girls" (p. 8). The fact that Alaska Natives tend to have a larger ideal body image seems to imply that, for the Alaska Natives, the influence of family is stronger than the mainstream media. However, the struggle in which the Alaska Native women find themselves cannot be ignored. Hamilton (1996) suggests "the Alaska Native is exposed simultaneously to two quite different sets of values and images" (p. 69). This pressure from two different forces likely influenced how the Alaska Natives responded to the body image scale. It is plausible to assume that they were attempting to weigh which set "of values and images" had a stronger influence in their lives. Again, Hamilton suggests that some Alaska Natives find themselves in the very difficult position of identifying with the mainstream culture but prevented from fully identifying with these images, such as body image, because they may be seen as different by peers or family members in an Alaskan traditional sense. As a result, they are both moving away from their traditional roots and, at the same time, are not fully able to integrate into the mainstream society.

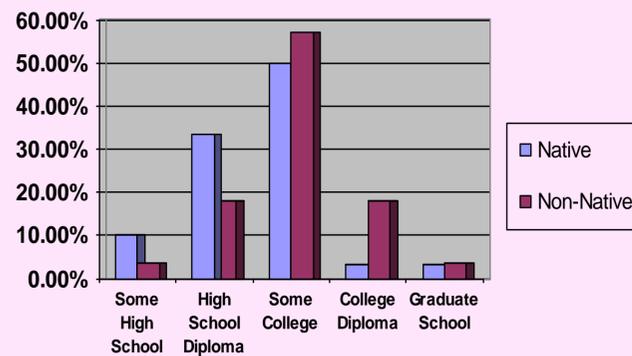
## Means and Standard Deviations for BIA-O



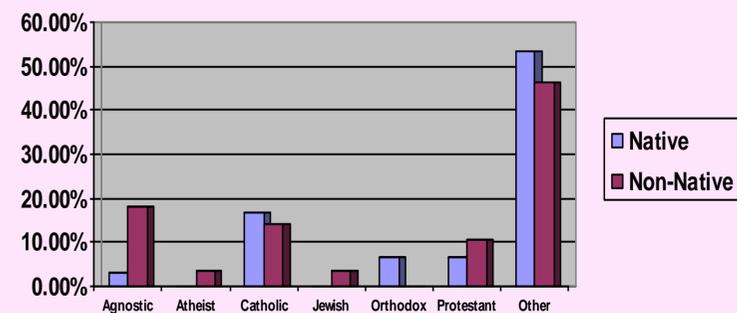
## Age Characteristics



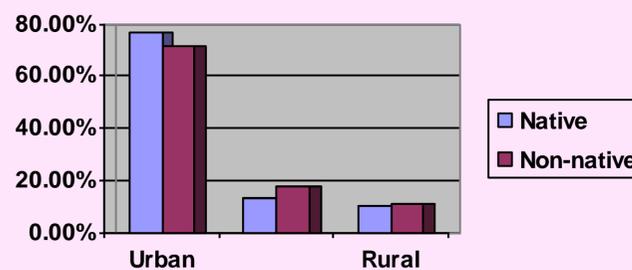
## Education Level



## Religious or Spiritual Affiliation



## Type of Current Residence



## Family Income

