About Melissa

Melissa Kimber completed an undergraduate and master’s degree in social work. She’s currently a PhD candidate in the Health Research Methodology Program at McMaster University, in Hamilton, Ontario. Her community-based social work experience is largely with women and children who have experienced intimate partner violence and child maltreatment, in addition to volunteering with at-risk youth and with immigrant families who relocated to Canada. In her free time, Melissa plays ice hockey and soccer.

What you need to know

For her dissertation, Melissa is doing a mixed-methods study looking at how immigrant adolescents in Canada and the United States perceive their body and measure their body image. This will involve three different research projects:

- A review of published literature;
- A study to look at whether the tools currently used to measure body image dissatisfaction are actually appropriate for use with immigrant children and teens.
- A qualitative exploratory study that will involve interviews with immigrant teens.

Melissa Kimber: Body-image Dissatisfaction Among Immigrant Teens
What is Melissa’s research about?

Understanding the experiences of immigrant teens

Body-image dissatisfaction is well documented as being a key predictor of eating disorders. Among North American-born teens, both boys and girls, body-image dissatisfaction is so pervasive that researchers have labeled it as ‘normative’, Melissa said.

“But we don’t have a good understanding of body image and its related psychopathology of eating disorders among immigrant children and adolescents,” she added.

This is particularly problematic given that foreign-born children and their parents constitute the fastest growing segment of the population in North America.

More research is needed to see if immigrant teens are dissatisfied with their body-image to a similar extent and if their discontent—or lack of it—varies according to their immigrant generational status, sex, and experiences of adopting the culture of their new country.

For her dissertation, Melissa is doing a mixed-methods study looking at how immigrant adolescents in Canada and the United States perceive their body and measure their body image. This will involve three different research projects:

- A review of the published research and grey literature on the subject. This will include peer-reviewed journal articles as well as dissertations and theses, as well as published reports looking at the topic of body image relative to immigrant children and adolescents.
- A study looking at measurement invariance. This study will look at whether the tools currently used to measure body image dissatisfaction are actually appropriate for use with immigrant children and adolescents if they will allow accurate comparisons across immigrant and non-immigrant groups.
- A qualitative exploratory study that will involve interviews with immigrant adolescents, primarily from the southern Ontario area. Questions will focus on their perceptions of body image, their expectations for themselves in relation to their body, and their perceived expectations for body weight and shape from their parents, their peers, and the media, as well as the extent to which they feel these perceptions may have changed since they moved to Canada.

By studying body image, we can find out if a person is very dissatisfied with their body and if they may be at risk for developing an eating disorder, Melissa explained.

Her research is looking specifically at first- and second-generation immigrant who are 12 to 18 years old, although some studies she’s reviewing include kids as young as 10. She’ll define first-generation immigrants as those who were themselves born outside Canada or the US and second-generation as those who were born in Canada or the US with at least one parent who is foreign born.
She’s going to include both the general population of immigrant teens in Southwestern Ontario and a clinical sample who have received treatment for an eating disorder. This will help her to try and tease apart the differences in body-image dissatisfaction and its contributing factors.

The research is being funded through a Graduate Research Scholarship from McMaster University and she expects to complete it by June 2014.

**What will this research bring to the sector?**

**Encourage use of consistent language**

Melissa hopes that her research will help to broaden our understanding of whether or not there are factors specific to the immigration experience that are at play with respect to eating disorders in this group. For example, do their experiences as they adapt to and adopt the culture of their new country actually have an impact on their own body image and how they process ideas of body image in relation to relationships they have with others?

She would also like her research to help advance our understanding of what is an appropriate way to measure perceptions of body image in teen immigrants.

“What we’re finding is that a number of studies use very different language to define ‘immigrant’, and without using a consistent language, we can’t really make concrete conclusions about the particular population,” she said.

**Project Title:** Body-image dissatisfaction among immigrant and non-immigrant adolescents in North America: An examination of the current literature, measurement properties and perceptions.

**Project Supervisors:** Dr. Katholiki Georgiades (Offord Centre for Child Studies and McMaster University); Dr. Susan Jack, McMaster University; Dr. Jennifer Couturier (McMaster University); and Dr. Olive Wahoush (McMaster University).

To explain, Melissa used the example of the different ways that researchers have referred to people of Asian ethnicity, which can lead to confusion.

“Some individuals might say, for example, ‘Asian Canadians’, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that the individuals are immigrants. They could be descendants from multiple generations of individuals who were born in Asia,” she noted.

“Other people might use ‘samples of Asians’,” she added. “And ‘Asians’ is an extremely broad term, in and of itself, and so that’s a problem as well. When people use this language, they don’t strictly identify what group of Asians are included in that all-encompassing term.”

**How can this research be used?**

**Better approaches to research on body image**

Melissa hopes to make recommendations for issues that researchers should consider when designing...
She hopes other researchers will also recognize the need to use a consistent language when discussing body image and body-image dissatisfaction.

**What’s next for Melissa?**

Melissa is also conducting research on the experience of intimate-partner violence and child maltreatment within immigrant families in Canada, and on the implementation of evidence-based practices in eating disorder treatment programs.

*For more information about Melissa’s study, please contact her at melissa.kimber@sickkids.ca or at kimberms@mcmaster.ca.*

*Author: Rossana Coriandoli*

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