

Fat women's experiences of navigating sex and sexuality

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore fat women's experiences of sex and sexuality in Aotearoa New Zealand. Despite a growing body of literature within fat studies, there is still very little writing that considers the lived experiences of fat people. This research is informed by feminist theory and utilises interviews with self-identified fat women to consider the ways that being a fat woman in society may impact one's sexual experiences and relationships. Analysis of these interviews shows that fat women in society continue to have complex and sometimes contradictory feelings about their bodies. Their particular lived experiences occur due to an intersection of being fat and being women, and their experiences are varied. The positive and negative personal experiences these women shared show that the fat body is still interpreted in numerous different ways.

Keywords

Fat, women, sex, bodies, relationships, feminist theory, Fat Studies

Introduction

Fat people are the subject of a huge amount of critical media and medical attention, but very rarely are their voices given any attention or platform (Lupton, 2013; Gaily, 2014; Simic, 2015). In particular, the subject of 'fat sex' remains taboo. Fat people have stereotypically been portrayed as unattractive and this has led to fat people, particularly fat women, being desexualised (Braziel, 2001; Murray, 2004).

This research therefore explores fat women's experiences of sex and sexuality in a society that often suggests their bodies are inherently non-sexual. It contributes to the noted gap in the literature regarding discussions of fat sex (Hester & Walters, 2015). The data for this research comes from interviews with four fat women in which they speak from their own experiences. Studying fat bodies is important, both for understanding the stigma and oppression faced by people existing in those bodies, and also to undermine stereotypes about fat people and bodies. There is a need to talk to those who are living in fat bodies so that we can 'understand the positive aspects of their lives rather than assuming that the negative aspects are all there is' (Chrisler, 2012, p. 614). This report aims to explore the range of experiences fat women may have with regard to sex and sexuality, without assuming that their bodies inherently determine their sexuality.

In this research I specifically focus on the sexual experiences of fat women. While fat men can also face stigma in society, their experiences may be different due to gender stereotypes and gendered expectations placed on individuals. Moreover, it has been argued that women are more restricted and tyrannised by societal pressure to be thin (Bordo, 1993; Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012). For this reason, I focus on how the experience of fat intersects with the experience of being a woman. Throughout this report I use the word 'fat' in place of other commonly used words such as 'obese' and 'overweight'. I have chosen the word 'fat' because it 'does not denote a medical condition or suggest there is an ideal weight' (Gailey, 2014, p.

3). My aim is to treat the bodies of the women I talk to with respect, not assuming knowledge about the health of these women on the basis of their bodies.

Literature on fat bodies and sex

Prior to my interviews, I carried out an extensive literature review in order to consider the context in which my research takes place. Below, I briefly cover some of the key ideas about fat women's bodies as discussed in academic literature.

Fat as a feminist issue

Since the 1970s, feminists have written about how women are oppressed through narrow body ideals and expectations. However, for some time, this work focused on the requirement of thin bodies for women, without much discussion about fat bodies as a feminist concern. Susie Orbach's 1978 text, *Fat is a feminist issue*, was one of the first to approach discussions about being fat from a distinctly feminist viewpoint. In her book, Orbach argues that 'being fat represents an attempt to break free of society's sex stereotypes' (1978, p. 18). She suggests that women, consciously or unconsciously, make the decision to be fat in order to reject rigid gender stereotypes. Orbach's work focuses on the idea that, to a certain extent, women choose to be fat; she still appears to view fat as a problem, but one that cannot be solved without applying feminist knowledge to understand why women become fat in the first place. More recently, the genre of Fat Studies has moved towards a more positive acceptance of fat, but Orbach's work has an important place in framing the way fat has become a feminist topic.

In the early 2000s, feminist scholars 'from various disciplines within which their work on fat had been marginalised' pioneered Fat Studies, which was 'closely aligned to fat activism' (Simic, 2015, p. 28). This understanding of the way feminism and fat bodies are linked is useful for justifying a gendered analysis of fat bodies. It acknowledges that living in a fat body will have particular and possibly different effects and consequences for women compared to men.

Academics have also questioned why feminists have not paid more attention to the experience of being fat, given how seriously anti-fat bias impacts the lives of women. Fikkan and Rothblum (2012) explore studies of discrimination against fat women in employment, the media, and in relationships. They effectively show that there are specifically gendered aspects to weight-bias, in that fat women face particular struggles and disadvantages that fat men do not. In particular, their work shows how the issue of fat-bias already fits within the scope of feminist work, and they contend that fighting such bias should be included in a feminist agenda.

The sexualisation of fat bodies

As fat bodies have begun to receive more attention in academic literature, some researchers have started considering the ways fat bodies are sexualised. Gailey argues that 'large women are often considered either nonsexual or sexually insatiable and desperate' (2014, p. 111). Her work points out the difficulties these contrasting stereotypes pose for fat women in terms of navigating sex and understanding their bodies as sexual. As a result, 'having a sex life that is satisfactory is transgressive' for fat women (2014, p. 133). Gailey also uses interviews to explore fat women's own perspectives on sex, and this is discussed further in the next section.

While there is not a great deal of academic attention given to exploring fat bodies as sexual, messages about fat people and sexuality are explored through the media, although often in a negative light. Representations and discussions of fat people in the media make it clear that

‘fat people are not considered sexually attractive, or as individuals with sexual agency’ (Pause, 2015, p. 38). Pause also raises the fact that fat sex has been explored more frequently outside the academic sphere, and fat people have themselves begun writing books about fat sex (2015). This shows that, in some ways, fat sex is becoming less of a taboo topic and there are more resources now for people who are navigating sexual experiences in fat bodies. However, it remains the case that there is a need for further research which centres upon fat women’s sexual experiences in order to counteract the stereotypical way they are presented in the media.

Fat women’s sexual experiences

From the research I have reviewed, there appears to be a clear gap in the literature with regard to fat women speaking about their own sexual experiences. As mentioned above, Gailey is one of the only authors who has done research in this way, carrying out interviews with 74 self-identified fat American women about their life experiences. Gailey’s data shows both positive and negative ideas about the way fat women navigate sex, and many of these ideas can be tied to the way society devalues fat women. For example, a number of the women in Gailey’s study expressed the view that they had to focus on the needs and satisfaction of their sexual partners ahead of their own, because they feared their partners would otherwise lose interest (Gailey, 2015). However, a number of women also said that they had positive sexual relationships. For some, this developed because they had partners who paid positive attention to their bodies; but more broadly, Gailey found that women who embraced their own bodies were more likely to have positive and satisfying sexual experiences.

Other research aligns with Gailey’s findings regarding body image and sexual satisfaction. A study carried out in the United States argued that ‘both body dissatisfaction and self-objectification have been found to be related to sexuality outcomes in women’ (Satinsky, Dennis, Reece, Sanders, & Bardzell, 2013, p. 711). The women they spoke to had complex relationships with their own bodies, and there were a range of different feelings about how that related to their sexual experiences. Ultimately, some of the women accepted their bodies and found this allowed them to have good sexual experiences. Others, however, were more concerned about their weight and this similarly impacted their sexual experiences, usually in a negative way. Satinsky et. al. (2013) therefore conclude that it is more useful for society and the media to undermine problematic views of fat bodies than it is to encourage weight loss in terms of improving sexual health outcomes. Fat women’s sexual health is likely to be better if they accept and embrace their bodies; in turn, this is more likely to be achieved if society stops condemning and shaming these bodies.

The academic works mentioned above reaffirm the value of research that allows fat women to speak to their own sexual experiences; however, such research is lacking, particularly outside the United States. In particular, the way that treatment of fat bodies has been recognised as a feminist issue highlights the need to consider the intersection of being fat and being a woman. As sexual relationships are often very gendered interactions, it is valuable to combine these areas and seek insight into fat women’s sexual experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Theoretical framework

My research draws on feminist standpoint theory, which allows participants to express ‘female experience at a particular time and place, located within a particular set of social relations’ (Hartsock, 1983, p. 303). This approach highlights the importance of considering women’s

lived experiences as material for research, and fits within a social constructionism framework, whereby meaning is socially constructed through experience and interpretation.

More recently, feminist theory has begun to consider the way other aspects of identity relate to and intersect with gender oppression, through an intersectional framework. Intersectionality recognises that ‘more than one category of difference (e.g. race, gender, class) plays a role in examinations of complex political problems and processes’ (Hancock, 2007, p. 251). While traditional standpoint theory has suggested that the experiences of women need to be considered, intersectional theory rejects universalising women’s experience and instead recognises that women have numerous and conflicting lived experiences marked by different and intersecting identities. Researchers need to make space for the voices of many women, whose experiences are different due to their intersecting identities, such as class and race. I contend that body size is another aspect of identity that intersects with gender and needs to be accounted for. Fat women, who have largely been ignored as a specific group, have a particular perspective; their standpoint is therefore a valuable one to consider alongside other aspects of their identity.

Methodology

The research for this report was completed in 2016 for an Honours dissertation carried out at Victoria University of Wellington.¹ The insights in this report came from one-on-one interviews with four women who self-identified as fat. The interviews were all loosely-structured around the idea of sexual experiences in the fat body, allowing the interviewees to drive the conversation and cover a wide range of experiences. My own position during this research was as a 23-year-old white woman, who self-identified as fat. During the interviews, I was aware that being fat myself could make the interviewees feel more comfortable discussing their experiences with me. The four women I interviewed ranged in age from 24 to 33 years old. One woman identified herself as NZ European, one as British white, one as NZ Pākehā and NZ Māori, and one as half-Samoan, half-Pākehā. Two of the women were in monogamous, heterosexual relationships, while one was single and the fourth was in a polyamorous relationship. In relation to sexuality, two of the women described themselves as heterosexual, one as bisexual, and one as pansexual.

Findings

Through a process of transcribing and coding my data, I deduced four key themes which are discussed below: complex relationships, gendered fat, positive sex, and negative sex.

Complex relationships

The four women I spoke to all recognised that society sends particular messages about fat bodies, which contribute to the stigmatisation of fat people. As a result, these women all had to find a way to value and accept their own bodies, often leading them to describe complex relationships with their bodies. For Kim,² being raised in a positive household instilled her with a feeling of confidence that she carried throughout her life: ‘I’ve always been such a confident person. I don’t have any issues with my body, if you’ve got an issue with it then that’s your issue ... I don’t see weight sizes, I just see them as people’ (Kim, 32). For all the women, this confidence seemed to be driven by an understanding that they were going to have to find a way

to accept themselves because society would not.

[I had to] tell myself I was pretty because no one else was doing it. So I garnered the self-confidence from within and I've always had it with me since those teenage years where I held a mirror up to my face and I told myself that I was beautiful, that I was good enough (Francesca, 33).

Two of the women felt that it had been a journey for them to achieve body acceptance. After having her son, Lily went through a process of unpacking the negative views she held of her body and learning to embrace the word 'fat': 'It's just a descriptive term to describe my body shape the same way you have blue eyes' (Lily, 33). This was a process that occurred later for Lily as she did not feel she was fat when she was younger. It was following her pregnancy at the age of 19 that she realised her body had changed. She worked to accept that and to not buy into stereotypes about fat bodies: 'Often in our world those two things go together. Like you can't be fat and attractive. You're either thin and attractive or fat and gross. And I don't believe that now but it has taken a really long time to detach those things in my head' (Lily, 33).

April found that for a long time she felt she should be grateful when men showed a sexual interest in her, because society taught her that fat women were unattractive and non-sexual. She described her relationship with her body as a journey that had a positive turning point: 'Something changed, some cog turned. It made me realise that I deserved to have sexual satisfaction and I deserved to be able to choose who I had sex with' (April, 24). All the women I interviewed had reached a point where they understood that being fat did not mean there was something inherently wrong with them; nevertheless, some also expressed how difficult it is to remember this at all times in order to value their bodies.

Gendered fat

All the participants felt that being a fat women specifically impacted the way they were treated as sexual beings. Lily pointed out that the intersection of gender and fat is important because of the way women's bodies are often treated as sexual objects. She felt this was tied to why fat women are typically thought of as nonsexual: 'I do feel like in the sense that women are sometimes treated as trophies, if your trophy has a fat body it's not as valuable as if your trophy has a thin body' (Lily, 33).

The idea of women being the 'right type of fat' was also discussed by the interviewees. April, for example, did not feel she met the ideals of what a fat woman should look like: 'I'm not a conventional body type that's associated with what's sexy, so I haven't got tits, I don't personally think I've got a great ass, so I don't feel like I fit that hourglass voluptuous idea of what it is to be a fat lady' (April, 24). April felt there were some fat women who were more likely to be seen as sexual because they still adhered to other stereotypes with regard to what makes a woman sexy, specifically having a traditionally attractive figure. Lily echoed this view: 'You have to be the right kind of fat body. For example, your waist still has to go in and your tits and ass have to be bigger than your waist ... These are things that I feel are things that make someone attractive fat as opposed to unattractive fat' (Lily, 33).

Broadly speaking, my interviewees believed it was difficult to be a fat and a woman, and that this stemmed from the focus put on women's appearance, particularly by the media. April and Lily both made the point that it is not considered strange for a thin woman to date a fat man but that it is less socially acceptable for a fat woman to be in a relationship with a thin man. Francesca was the one interviewee who felt fat men have a harder time sexually and romantically. She thought that fat men were more likely to be seen as slobs while women could still be curvy and sexy. Again, this suggests it may be easier to be considered an attractive fat

women if you have a particular curvy figure that complies with social norms of attractiveness. All the women felt that the experience of being fat differs for men and women, and that there are different expectations placed on them by both society and potential partners.

Negative sex

Three of the women discussed experiences or feelings that had been negative with regard to their bodies and sex. This included concerns about the sort of relationships they would have and how sexual partners would treat them. For Lily, this meant wondering if it was going to be more difficult for her to find partners that were interested in her and attracted to her body: 'I did always kind of have this feeling that thinner women would have an easier time finding a long-term partner than fatter women ... and that thin women are more desired than fat women' (Lily, 33). At the time I spoke to her, Lily had been in a polyamorous relationship for five years but still had concerns about men finding her body attractive. She discussed how, when she entered her current relationship, she found comfort in the fact her partner had been with other fat women: 'His last partner was fatter than I am so I always felt like it was okay with him' (Lily, 33). Knowing that he had been attracted to bigger women than her therefore allowed Lily to feel secure about his attraction to her.

Francesca and April also discussed having particular expectations regarding the sorts of relationships they would have. Francesca realised at a young age that she was viewed differently to her thin friends and worried she would be less likely to find a husband. With April, the discussion centred around finding someone to have a relationship with that went beyond sex. While she wanted someone to be attracted to her, she felt it was a double-edged sword with regard to the possible fetishisation of her body: 'People call them chubby chasers, but whatever they call them I can't find them ... Part of me is a bit worried as well ... If someone is that into a particular type of person, are they going to get with me for the wrong reasons?' (April, 24).

Another element of negative sexual experiences that emerged during the interviews was the difference between people who were willing to sleep with fat women, and those who were willing to be open about it. Francesca went through a period of sleeping with a lot of men and said that some of these men would ask her to keep it a secret: 'They're ashamed, you know, society has told them that fat is unattractive and therefore it's wrong to be seen to enjoy a fat woman' (Francesca, 33). April also found that there were men who did not want other people to know they were attracted to a fat woman:

What I've found with men so far is there's a difference between having sex with a fat woman and being in a relationship with a fat woman. You know, like being in a relationship with a fat woman is a commitment to say that yeah, I'm into this person because of who they are not what they look like, or I'm into this person because I love what they look like (April, 24).

Finally, some of the women disclosed to me specific sexual experiences they had with people where sexual partners would comment on or make reference to their weight in a negative way. Francesca and April both spoke of men who could not get or sustain an erection and who would suggest that this was because they were turned off by seeing the fat, or because they did not believe they were supposed to have sex with fat women. Interestingly, both women had stories that involved men touching their stomachs in very particular ways. Francesca recalled a man who, 'while we were fucking on the side of the bed he would hold my stomach to stop it from wobbling' (Francesca, 33). April also spoke of an experience involving a man touching her stomach.

I had sex with a guy that was tiny ... So he pulled out after he'd finished and proceeded to jiggle my stomach and say, 'You and me babe, we need to sort this out'. And like for me back then I was just like oh my god ... I didn't know what to say and was almost like paralysed to the bed (April, 24).

While these women's sexual encounters were not overwhelmingly negative, they did experience some unpleasant incidents that specifically related to their body size; in some cases, this impacted the women by making them expect worse treatment by their sexual partners.

Positive sex

Although many of the women spoke to me about their negative sexual experiences, Kim felt that her sexual experiences were overwhelmingly positive. The first man she had sex with made her feel comfortable and this marked the start of a healthy sex life, including with her current partner of eleven years: 'Every guy I met, whether it was a drunken night out or just online or through friends, it's always been fun and they've never said anything so I took that as they didn't have an issue with my body otherwise they wouldn't have gone down that road' (Kim, 32).

While not all the women could say that their experiences were always as positive, they all mentioned enjoyable occasions where they had been respected by their sex partner. April was the only interviewee who was currently single, but she spoke of positive experiences with men who she felt had valued her and found her attractive without fetishising her:

[We] went home and had the best sex of my life. And it was just really full on and a really intense experience for me and it wasn't something I'd ever had in a way that made me feel like he's literally doing this cause he's into me, not because of any other reason (April, 24).

The three interviewees who were currently in relationships spoke positively with regard to how their partners made them feel about their bodies. Lily found it reassuring to be in a relationship with a man who identified as a feminist ally. She also felt her polyamorous relationship had helped her come to terms with her body, as her partner had simultaneously been in relationships with other women to whom Lily would speak openly about body acceptance. As discussed above, Kim felt her partner of eleven years had always treated her with respect and made her feel good by being openly affectionate towards her. Francesca, who was in her first long-term monogamous relationship with her partner of two years, similarly felt it was a positive relationship with a man who was not just accepting of her body, but very complimentary of her:

He always tells me I'm really pretty, really gorgeous. He says, 'I met you as a fat girl, I like you as a fat girl' ... And yeah, he's not ashamed to be seen with me, he's really proud to be seen with me because he loves me and so he gives me affection in public (Francesca, 33).

For these women, being in loving and positive relationships was helpful for their own relationships with their bodies. In particular, they were encouraged by partners who found an appropriate balance whereby they appreciated their bodies without fetishising them.

Discussion

The interviews with these four women made clear the complex feelings and experiences they had with their bodies. As outlined above, there was a broad range of sexual scenarios that the women had encountered, and it was insightful to discuss with the women how they felt their weight was related to this. It was positive to learn that all of the women were at a stage in their lives, and in their relationships with their bodies, where they felt themselves to be worthy of

love and affection and they did not feel less worthy as people for being fat. The way that fat people are treated in the media and in society suggests this is not a particularly easy status for fat women to achieve. Moreover, societal beauty standards continue to demand that women are thin and that if they are not, they should be doing everything in their power to attain thinness. Beauty standards have been constructed so that women know what the 'ideal' body is, and are encouraged 'to believe that, with effort, they can approach it' (Chrisler, 2012, p. 609). Such views perpetuate the idea that fat people should be held accountable for their own bodies and shamed into attempting to change them. These societal views were recognised by the women I interviewed, who felt people continued to judge their bodies. However, they had developed, or sustained, the belief that their bodies did not define who they were as people and should not define their relationships either.

Largely, the women's feelings about the intersection of being women and fat echoed the literature, which 'indicates that fat women are more stigmatised than fat men' (Gailey & Prohaska, 2009, p. 160). In particular, they felt that society demanded beauty at a higher standard from women than from men, such that they were judged more for not adhering to strict body standards that require women to be thin. Of particular interest was the recognition from a number of my interviewees that the stigma both they and other fat women faced was somewhat dependent on their body shape, as well as size. They felt that women with an hourglass figure were more likely to be deemed 'curvy' and therefore still able to be viewed as sexy, because this figure type is regarded as more 'acceptable' according to contemporary western beauty standards.

Previous research also highlights that 'another area in which women are more heavily penalised for their weight than males is in the context of romantic relationships' (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012, p. 581). A number of my interviewees felt men could get away with being larger than women, as contemporary gender norms dictate that women should be the petite and delicate partner in a relationship. In particular, a number of the women pointed out the judgment that comes with fat women dating skinny men, while that judgment does not happen in reverse. Again, this can be tied to gender norms, where men are expected to demonstrate their masculinity through having sex and relationships with attractive women. Therefore, 'men may not feel they are adhering to the hegemonic masculine ideal by having sex with a woman who is fat' (Gailey & Prohaska, 2009, p. 163). As a result, fat women are often portrayed as unattractive and undesirable to men.

The sexual experiences discussed by my interviewees ranged from incredibly positive ones, where they felt supported by their partners, to experiences where their bodies were openly judged and they felt humiliated or shocked. Looking back on those experiences, the women recognised the horrible ways they had been treated and in almost all cases had determined that they deserved better. This is a positive finding, given Gailey's observation that many women felt 'they had to endure mistreatment, lies, or disrespect because they assumed no one else would love them' (2014, p. 117). One of my interviewees (April) acknowledged that, despite being treated poorly in a long-term relationship, concern about whether or not other men would be attracted to her was a factor in her taking longer to end the relationship. Still, she felt that if the same situation arose now she would have the confidence to know that her concerns were unfounded.

Nevertheless, being a fat woman is sometimes viewed by others as synonymous with being unattractive, and as a result, fat women 'are rendered culturally asexual, as it is assumed that no man would desire them' (Lupton, 2013, p. 61). Interestingly, all the women I interviewed found that they could find partners who were attracted to them and wanted to have sex with them, but who were also ashamed of these feelings. This likely stems from the social stigma

associated with being fat, and a fear on behalf of the men that they too would suffer such stigma if they were open about their attraction to fat women.

Some of my findings mirrored those of other studies done in this research area. Specifically, Gailey found that 'women who came to embrace their fat bodies reported higher levels of sexual enjoyment than they did prior to accepting their body' (Gailey, 2014, p. 126). This is also reinforced in the work of Satinsky, Reece, Sanders, Dennis, and Bardzell (2012), where participants who were more confident about their appearance seemed to have better sexual experiences. Similarly, the women I spoke to felt that their experiences became more positive when they appreciated their own bodies. Part of this appeared to stem from the fact that they became more determined to choose sexual partners who treated their bodies with respect and who made them feel good. One of my interviewees did note that she had negative sexual experiences when her partner felt uncomfortable with her body, even when she herself did not. In the main, however, sex was a less nerve-wracking experience for the women when they felt comfortable in their own skin.

My findings also align with those of Gailey (2014) and Satinsky et al. (2012) in suggesting that it is not weight per se that causes fat women to have negative sexual experiences, but rather the stigma surrounding fat bodies. Such stigma leads to feelings of shame and dissatisfaction with one's body, which in turn can result in difficulty relaxing and enjoying sex. Research has noted connections between women's negative views of their bodies and lower levels of sexual desire (Seal, Bradford, & Meston, 2009). The women I interviewed had all experienced positive sexual relationships; they felt comfortable engaging in these relationships when they felt good about their bodies and were boosted by partners who also treated their bodies kindly and with respect. Results from research surrounding the impact of weight on sexuality are mixed, with some studies suggesting that weight has little to no negative impact on a person's sexuality (Kaneshiro et al., 2008; Satinsky et al., 2012). Other research, however, has suggested that weight loss could be linked to improved sexual experience (Larsen, Wagner, & Heitmann, 2007; Kolotkin et al., 2008). My research participants reported that they were able to have positive sexual relationships while being fat, but felt there could be a link between these positive experiences and their own confidence and acceptance of their bodies. As a result, it seems that undermining negative views of fat bodies may have a positive outcome for fat women's sexual experiences, and may actually be more successful than weight loss in achieving this.

Sexual relationships are often built around structures of heteronormativity, which suggest women have to be attractive for men. Fat can be seen as a threat to these normative ideas about masculinity and femininity because 'fat women who enjoy sex and find and pursue partners demonstrate that the conventional beauty messages are inaccurate or misleading' (Gailey, 2014, p. 112). The women I spoke to certainly demonstrated that those conventional beauty messages are too restrictive, and that fat women can establish and develop positive relationships; three of my interviewees were currently in some form of healthy relationship, and all had experienced fulfilling sexual interactions. Importantly, these women were finding people who were willing to ignore the societal stigma associated with fat people and their partners in favour of developing a relationship based on mutual attraction. These interviews were very positive in the sense that the women all expressed feelings that they were treated as equals in their relationships, not as hypersexual or non-sexual beings in the stereotyped way that fat women often have been.

Conclusion

This project has contributed to the current scholarly literature on fat women and the ways they navigate sex and sexuality. Importantly, through the interviews with four self-identified fat women, this project has shown that fat women have a broad range of sexual experiences, not all of which are negative. There continues to be value in learning about the complex ways fat women feel about their bodies, because the combination of societal messages, gendered expectations, and treatment from others tends to lead to complicated and sometimes contradictory feelings about the fat bodies in which these women live. As a result, fat women often have to work to fully accept their bodies and to see themselves as worthy of respectful treatment. The women I spoke to have, where necessary, put in this work and are consequently having positive sexual and romantic relationships. This project has therefore shown hope that fat women can be treated well by themselves and by others, and that the quality of their experiences does not have to be compromised because of the size of their bodies.

OLIVIA HALL is currently completing her Masters degree in Gender Studies at The London School of Economics and Political Science. She has a Bachelor of Arts in Gender Studies and politics from the University of Otago, and a first class Honours degree in Sociology from Victoria University of Wellington. She is particularly interested in undertaking qualitative research with people in marginalised bodies. Alongside her academic work, Olivia is a successful spoken word poet who writes a lot about feminism and bodies.

Notes

- 1 The research was given ethical clearance by the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee on 23 May 2016.
- 2 Throughout this report, I refer to participants by pseudonyms in order to protect their identity.

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