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Living large: the experiences of large-bodied women when
accessing general practice services

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Philosophy (Nursing)

at

Massey University

Palmerston North, New Zealand

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December 2011

Abstract

The 'obesity epidemic' of the past two decades has resulted in numerous studies reporting higher levels of stigma and discrimination experienced by obese/overweight women, both within the health care system and society in the main. Despite general practice being the most utilised point of access for health care services, there has been very little international or national exploration of the experiences of large-bodied women accessing these services.

Utilising a qualitative, descriptive research design, this post-structuralist feminist study has enabled a group of large-bodied women to express their stories of accessing general practice services. Eight self identified large-bodied women volunteered to participate in semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Thematic analysis identified seven themes: Early experiences of body perception, Confronting social stereotypes, Contending with feminine beauty ideals, Perceptions of health, Pursuing health, Respecting the whole person and Feeling safe to access care.

The women in this study articulated broader interpretations of health and well-being than those teachings reproduced within dominant bio-medical and social discourses of obesity. When these women's personal context, beliefs and values are silenced by the health care provider, the rhetoric of health care professional claims of patient-centred care has given way to these women experiencing stigmatisation and a sense of ambiguity about general practice services. However, when space is given for multiple interpretations of obesity to exist within the patient-health care provider relationship, these women feel respected, their health needs are satisfied and they are more comfortable to engage in health screening services. Resisting the powerful socio-cultural milieu which supports the superiority of a slim female body as a signifier of both health and beauty presents a challenge for health care professionals to negotiate. I contend however, that giving consideration to the perspectives of large-bodied women and critically reflecting upon one's own personal beliefs and attitudes about the overweight/obese, presents an opportunity to ensure clinical practice for this population is truly patient-centred.

Acknowledgements

There are many challenges and rewards that come from embarking on a thesis writing process, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have accompanied me on this journey.

Firstly, thank you to the eight wonderful women who gifted me with their time, trust and confidence to let me hear and share their stories.

To my supervisor Professor Jenny Carryer - words could never truly convey how much I value your support. Thank you for your unfailing guidance and uncanny ability to say just the right things when I needed it most.

Thank you to my extended family, friends and work colleagues for your constant encouragement and understanding, particularly both sets' of grandparent's who readily stepped in to entertain my children when deadlines were looming. I would also like to express thanks to my employers who have supported my study needs willingly. Many thanks also to Helen Johnston for her encouragement, endurance as a sounding board and pearls of wisdom.

Finally, thank you to my husband Tony, who has consistently and uncomplainingly provided me with the time and space and to complete this study. To my children Sam (9) and Hannah (6), thank you for your tolerance. Yes, I have time to take you to the park now!

Table of contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of contents	iv
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.1.1 Purpose of the study and its significance to health	2
1.2 Definition of terms	3
1.3 Background to the study.....	4
1.4 Researcher’s background	6
1.5 Philosophical framework – post-structuralist feminism.....	7
1.6 Researcher’s feminist position and assumptions	9
1.7 Overview of the thesis	10
1.8 Summary	12
Chapter 2 Literature review	13
2.1 Introduction.....	13
2.1.1 Parameters of the literature review	13
2.2 Construction of feminine beauty	14
2.3 Medicalisation of overweight/obesity.....	18
2.3.1 Thermodynamics – the medical discourse of obesity	20
2.4 Critique of the medical discourse of obesity; competing discourses.....	21
2.5 The social stigma of obesity	26
2.6 Stigmatisation in healthcare.....	30
2.6.1 Patients’ perception of stigma and weight bias	31
2.6.2 Medical and nursing attitudes and practices	33
2.6.3 Implications of stigma on women’s health	37
2.6.4 Lack of large-bodied women’s perspective.....	41
2.7 Summary	43

Chapter 3 Methodology.....	44
3.1 Introduction.....	44
3.2 Feminist theoretical perspective	44
3.3 Post structuralism.....	46
3.3.1 Post-structuralist feminism	48
3.3.2 Post-structuralist feminism and nursing.....	49
3.4 Tenets of feminist research	50
3.5 Qualitative descriptive research.....	52
3.6 Research methods.....	54
3.6.1 Ethical Approval	54
3.6.2 Participant selection	54
3.6.2.1 Ethical consideration to sample recruitment.....	57
3.6.3 Data Collection	58
3.6.3.1 Ethical consideration to data collection.....	61
3.6.4 Thematic analysis	62
3.6.4.1 Ethical consideration to analysis	64
3.7 Credibility in feminist research	65
3.8 Summary	67
Chapter 4 Living large with stigma.....	69
4.1 Introduction.....	69
4.1.1 A brief introduction to the participants	70
4.2 Early experiences of body perception.....	70
4.3 Confronting social stereotypes.....	75
4.4 Contending with feminine beauty ideals	80
4.5 Summary	84
Chapter 5 Living large and negotiating health	85
5.1 Introduction.....	85
5.2 Perceptions of health	86
5.3 Pursuing health.....	91
5.4 Summary	97

Chapter 6 Living large: accessing health care	98
6.1 Introduction.....	98
6.2 Respecting the whole person	98
6.2.1 My weight should not define me	99
6.2.2 Don't just look – listen	101
6.3 Feeling safe to access care	104
6.3.1 Stigma in the general practice experience.....	104
6.3.2 Trust is important	106
6.4 I want you to know.....	109
6.5 Summary	111
Chapter 7 Discussion and recommendations	112
7.1 Introduction.....	112
7.2 Discussion	113
7.3 Recommendations for health care professionals – a way forward.....	118
7.3.1 The role of nurses to affect a culture of change.....	122
7.4 Study limitations and opportunities for further research	124
7.5 Conclusion	126
References	128
Appendix A – Ethics approval	146
Appendix B – Advertisement	147
Appendix C – Editorial.....	148
Appendix D – Information sheet.....	149
Appendix E – Participant consent form.....	152
Appendix F – Authority for release of transcripts	153
Appendix G – Confidentiality form for transcriber(s).....	154
Appendix H – Interview guide.....	155