

Being Fat: Researching the Everyday Life of New Zealand Women Who Self-Identify as Fat

Talk for University of the Third Age,
Wellington City, 07 April 2017

Presenter: Julie Howe, PhD candidate (Sociology)
School of Social and Cultural Studies
Victoria University of Wellington

Julie.Howe@vuw.ac.nz

MY PERSONAL FAT BACKGROUND



Age 5 years



2012

2011

Visit Doctor re: ear ache

Locum asks "Have you ever thought about losing weight?"

Research Fat Acceptance/HAES etc.

2012

Begin BA (Hons) *The Latest Social Pariah: the Fat Lady*

Attend Fat Studies conference

Illness - intensely modified eating

2013+

Becomes an in-betweenner/Small fats

Remains a 'fat' woman



Image courtesy of www.dreamstime.com Image: 46916338

Health At Every Size (HAES)

The Health At Every Size® Principles are:

1. **Weight Inclusivity:** Accept and respect the inherent diversity of body shapes and sizes and reject the idealizing or pathologizing of specific weights.
2. **Health Enhancement:** Support health policies that improve and equalize access to information and services, and personal practices that improve human well-being, including attention to individual physical, economic, social, spiritual, emotional, and other needs.
3. **Respectful Care:** Acknowledge our biases, and work to end weight discrimination, weight stigma, and weight bias. Provide information and services from an understanding that socio-economic status, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, and other identities impact weight stigma, and support environments that address these inequities.
4. **Eating for Well-being:** Promote flexible, individualized eating based on hunger, satiety, nutritional needs, and pleasure, rather than any externally regulated eating plan focused on weight control.
5. **Life-Enhancing Movement:** Support physical activities that allow people of all sizes, abilities, and interests to engage in enjoyable movement, to the degree that they choose.

<https://www.sizediversityandhealth.org/content.asp?id=152>

Fearing 'fat'

“The discursive construction of body size is to blame for fashioning fat and the fat body into something inherently objectionable and problematic.”

Dupuis, Chamberlain & Cain
(*in Forth and Leitch, 2014, p 138*)

Discourse

“...is a form of power that circulates in the social field and can attach to strategies of domination as well as those of resistance [...]

[...] If relations of power are dispersed and fragmented throughout the social field, so must resistance to power be.”

Michel Foucault
(in *Diamond & Quinby, 1988, p 185*)

Habitual Thinking

- Tony Bennett, Sociologist, University of Western Sydney
- *Mind the Gap: Toward a Political History of Habit* (2015, Victoria University of Wellington)
- Re-think the 'habit'

Talk outline

My PhD research project

Fat women speak on:

- Language: “Fat” versus “obese”
- Being fat
- Weight stigma
- Weight loss attempts
- Morality and weight loss surgery

What you can do

Thesis focus

The 'Everybody knows' understanding that a fat body is an unhealthy one.

How do we know?

Who is telling us?

Who gains?

Why do individuals persist with weight loss attempts when an estimated 95% diets fail < 2 years?

What effect does repeated dieting 'failure' have on a woman's quality of life and sense of well-being?

Thesis questions

Why do we have an 'everybody knows' belief that there is 'an ideal body type'?

How do we know what that is?

Who gets to define it?

Why are those who choose to remove themselves from the dieting treadmill and take a Health At Every Size approach treated with such scorn and disgust?

Method

- A mostly qualitative mixed methods approach
 - one-on-one semi-structured interviews (n.30)
 - 3 focus groups (n.12 participants)

Sample Criteria

Women who self-identify as:

- **Fat** - may or may not be dieting
- **Previously Fat** - have lost a considerable amount of weight and who now conform to a smaller BMI
- **Re-gainers** - have lost a significant amount of weight but have since re-gained some, or all, of any weight lost

Human Ethics Committee approval # 21527, 15 December 2014

Working title of PhD research project

*Existing While Fat: A Qualitative Study of the
Everyday Life of Fat Women in New Zealand*

Feminist-informed study focusing solely on women's experiences of body size

'Fat' Talk

“I think ‘fat’ is honest. That’s what I think *[pause]* ...in the dark places that fat people don’t like to go to, that’s what we call ourselves.”

Susan, P keh , weight loss surgery recipient (Public)

“I can call myself it and it’s fine but god forbid anyone else trying to do that *[pause]* ...if someone called me fat I’d be gutted; it hurts.”

Cleo, P keh , fat

“I say to myself, “You are a f**king disgusting fat pig.” Or worse.”

Lucy, P keh , fat

'Fat' vs 'obese' and context

“If your doctor said to you, “Oh, well, you’re fat”, well, I would be really offended. You can’t really measure fat... whereas using terms like ‘overweight’, ‘obese’, ‘mildly or morbidly obese’ you actually know what they are talking about here. Whereas ‘fat’ is just a negative term.”

Gloria, Pasifika, weight loss surgery recipient (Public)

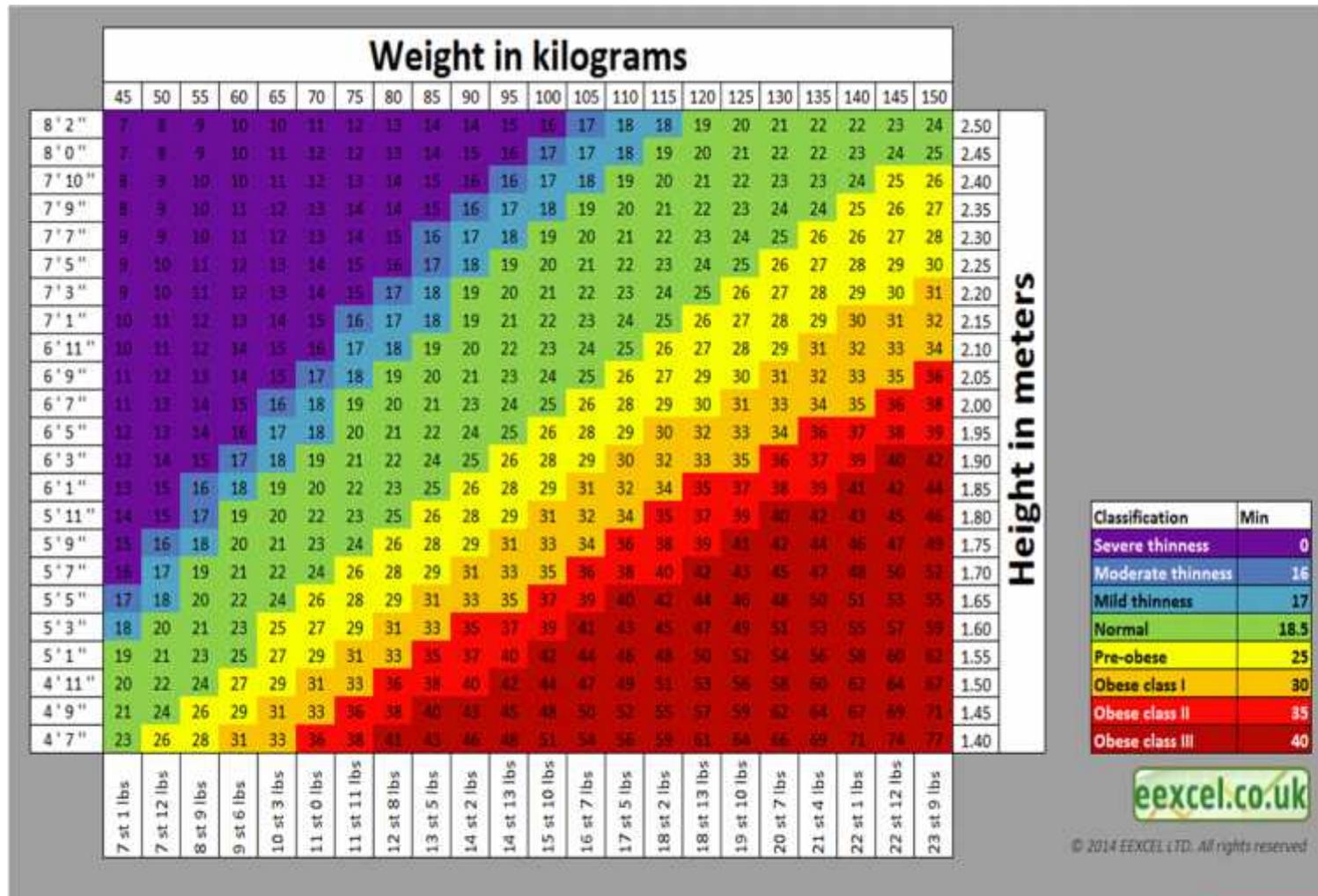
“To be called 'obese' - the only person I don't mind hearing that from is my doctor and even when she uses it, she only puts it in print in the computer, she doesn't say it to me.”

Abigail, P keh , fat

“I do describe myself as fat but not because I think 'obese' is a medical term. I think 'obese' is a nice way of saying it. So we don't say fat [to describe others] because 'fat' is a bad word.”

Aurora, P keh , fat

Body Mass Index (BMI)



The authority of the Body Mass Index

“At fifteen I walked out of the [doctor’s] office crying because, “Now I’m going to **die!**” Because I was obese. I always knew I was big, but I never let myself think that I was **obese.**”

Cleo, P keh , fat, *emphasis Cleo’s*

“I think the BMI is a terrible measure of health. It’s not a health measure at all but that’s how the medical field [pause] ...well, how large bodies are managed when it comes to weight.”

Gloria, Pasifika, weight loss surgery recipient (Public)

Withholding Healthcare

“It didn’t matter what I went with, it was always going to be my weight first and then, maybe, just maybe, there might be something else to consider.

You wouldn’t be allowed to say to somebody, “You’ve got sickle cell disease because you’re black, but we aren’t going to bother treating it because, you know, quite frankly, you are black, that’s not our fault. It’s disgusting.”

So really, what they [medical professionals] were doing was withholding healthcare, because they weren’t going to do tests or anything like that because it was all just being attributed to my body size. How I **looked**.”

Susan, Pūkehū, weight loss surgery recipient (Public)

Emphasis Susan’s

‘Obesity Epidemic’



“There’s this whole overarching idea of the ‘obesity epidemic’, and how it’s come about because of this excessive amount of eating that people have done *[small pause]* ...it’s true for some, it’s not true for others – it certainly wasn’t true for me!

You can’t treat a whole population the same way and expect it to work the same for everyone. It’s just not going to.”

Susan, P keh , weight loss surgery recipient (Public)

Emphasis Susan’s

Image courtesy of playstationallstars.wikia.com

Childhood dieting

[As a child] I was constantly on different diets, the Weight Watchers Diet, the Atkins Diet - whatever mum was testing out, I'd be on it as well. It gave me such warped perceptions of nutrition, of my body, you know, the size that I need to be and things like that. It's horrible. To this day these things are something to be concerned about.

Cleo (25), P keh , fat

“I've been dieting since I was 10 and being made to feel naughty. Being made to feel guilty for being the size you are while you are doing everything you can to stop it.”

Jenny (46), P keh , weight loss surgery recipient (Private)

The built environment

“There were times when I went out, when I went to cafes, I didn’t fit in the chair. ***I did not fit in the chair!*** And there’s been times when I’ve gone to people’s houses where I haven’t fitted in their chairs, which is just ***humiliating.***”

Anna, P keh , weight loss surgery recipient (Private).
Emphasis Anna’s

“I hated to fly. Aeroplane seats [*pause*] ...it was terrible. Inside my head I was thinking, “Oh my god! I’m encroaching on that person’s space!”

Jenny, P keh , weight loss surgery recipient (Private).
Emphasis Jenny’s

Shame & retreating from life

“If my boyfriend suggested going out I found an excuse as to why I ‘couldn’t go out’. I was embarrassed about myself; I was ashamed of myself. And I also felt a great sense of shame for my boyfriend. I didn’t want to be seen.”

Nikki, Pkeh, previously fat

“My husband *[pause]* ...I felt really embarrassed for him. He’d invite me to go to work do’s, and I’d make excuses, I just didn’t want his colleagues to see me and go, “What did he ever see in **her?**” It was just **horrible.**”

Gloria, Pasifika, weight loss surgery recipient (Public)

Emphasis Gloria’s

What others think

“I was really paranoid; if someone laughed, I’d just assume that they were laughing about me, even if they weren’t. That’s how it was and it felt really horrible to live like that, to feel like you’re being the object of ridicule *[pause]* ...it just hurts.

You’re living with that all the time. That feeling that you are an object of *[pause]* ...um, of other people’s jokes. That you’re the punchline. Or that you are the object of caution, “If you don’t watch what you do, or eat, this is what you are going to turn out like,” *[whispers]*, “Look at that person...she’s a terrible person!”

Gloria, Pasifika, weight loss surgery recipient (Public)

Endless dieting

“I have yo-yo dieted for years. Losing 20kg almost became a bi-annual event, and I was good at it but ultimately it never lasted.”

Nikki, Pūkehū, previously fat

“I’ve lost 24 kilos before, and put it all back on again - but this time, having had the surgery, the difference is that it makes you feel more hopeful. You’ve had a lifetime of losing and gaining, losing and gaining but **this** time you feel like, “Actually, this time, I might lose – and **not** gain it back!””

Susan, Pūkehū, weight loss surgery recipient (Public)

Emphasis Susan’s

Attempting to conform

“When I think back to all those years of dieting - that wasn’t about health. That was purely to get down to a certain size, *[pause]* ...not even a certain size really, it was just an acceptable size, and what’s acceptable to me is not going to be acceptable to society as a whole.

Susan, Pkeh, weight loss surgery recipient (Public)

“Everyone is different, and they have different influences, so I think it’s silly for us to expect to have the same body shape, or the same physical response to dieting just because we are women.”

Gloria, Pasifika, weight loss surgery recipient (Public)

Intersectionality: body and experience

“I have to remind myself that my body is not the same as everyone else’s; it never was and never will be. It is unique to me.

This [*gestures to her body*] is the sum of years of being me. It has come from so many things that others do not have: my genes, my family – having borne three children – and the influence of my culture, plus access to things that help sustain a healthy lifestyle.”

Gloria, Pasifika, weight loss surgery recipient (Public)

Culture and perception of thinness

“I’m thinking of my own upbringing where being skinny was seen as something *[pause]* ...it wasn’t desirable. Because in my culture, well, it’s kind of like, you’re not well *[pause]* ...if you’re **too** skinny. It could be a sign that your family isn’t doing too well; that you don’t have enough to eat.”

Gloria, Pasifika, weight loss surgery recipient (Public)

Emphasis Gloria’s

“Choosing” Weight Loss Surgery (WLS)

“I just didn’t want to live like this anymore, the way I was living. I was living but not really living, if you get what I mean. I didn’t feel that I was even a person [pause] ...If I was a person, I wasn’t recognised as being a [pause] ...I was like this gender-less [longer pause] ...**blob.**”

Gloria, Pasifika, weight loss surgery recipient (Public)

Emphasis Gloria’s

“It was kind of for health but in a different way to how others might see it. It was because I was sick and tired of going to the doctor and being told um [pause] ...“Your stomach bug is related to your weight.” I wanted to be seen as a person, not as a fat [pause] ...**thing.** That really pissed me off.”

Susan, Pkeh, weight loss surgery recipient (Public)

Emphasis Susan’s

“Choosing” WLS (continued)

“I wasn’t comfortable; I couldn’t sit properly. I had become insulin intolerant *[pause]* ...and I have two children and I thought to myself, “If I don’t do something now, these kids *[pause]* ...So for two reasons. First, for myself, to be comfortable. The second answer would be most ***definitely*** for my children. Hands down, it was for my kids.

Anna, Pūkehū, weight loss surgery recipient (Private)
Emphasis Anna’s

“Choosing” WLS (continued)

“I didn’t want my kids to grow up with a fat mum that people would make fun of them for. It happened with kids saying, “Your mum’s **fat!**” and that really broke my heart.

I said, “What did you say?”

And [child’s name] said, “I didn’t know what to say so I didn’t say anything.”

I felt really bad. It’s not their fault.”

Gloria, Pasifika, weight loss surgery recipient (Public)
Emphasis Gloria’s

WLS and stigma

“I didn’t want to admit to it [WLS] because you never know, it might not work. It would be failure on a grand scale, wouldn’t it? It wouldn’t be just like a diet that didn’t ‘stick’. It’s like, if it didn’t work it would be,

“You *idiot!* You should have just tried harder!”

Susan, Pkeh, weight loss surgery recipient (Public)

Emphasis Susan’s

“I didn’t feel safe sharing my experiences [of WLS] with [work colleagues and acquaintances] because I felt that they were already judging me for being fat.”

Gloria, Pasifika, weight loss surgery recipient (Public)

Heroes and Villains: Morality and publicly-funded WLS

“They talk about *their* tax dollars *[pause]* ...well, I’ve been a tax payer for all my life so I feel that I’m entitled. I’m allowed to do this! It’s out there, it’s available.

Compare it to the cost of somebody who climbs a mountain and falls off because they *choose* to climb a stupid mountain *[pause]* ...and then they have to be rescued!

But they’re heroes aren’t they? Because they’re so physical and fit. So it’s the judgement of the two behaviours, isn’t it? One is a hero and one is a villain.”

Susan, P keh , weight loss surgery recipient (Public)
Emphasis Susan’s

Visibility after weight loss

“I feel I’m more visible and I feel that I am able to participate more in things *[pause]* ...Now I feel that people actually see me as a person.

I feel that people are actually listening to me. Before [weight loss] I felt that people weren’t listening to me, just making judgements in their head about my size. Now I can just be myself.

But this is how I saw myself, before, the whole time, I **knew** this is **me!** But it’s like, now people can finally see what I always knew was there, what I could always **see** was there. But it was hidden behind layers of *[pause]* ...**fat**.

Gloria, Pasifika, weight loss surgery recipient (Public)
Emphasis Gloria’s

Treating each other better

“What is needed is a deeper understanding that health is profoundly related to the way we treat each other [...] We are not going to improve health until we treat each other better, and change the structural ways that people are treated poorly.”

Deb Burgard, 2015, *Association for Size Diversity & Health*,
(personal correspondence)

Summary

- Fat is not a disability; society dis-ables the fat person
- Stigmatising the fat body can have a very real negative effect
- This research is an important way to instil humanity and empathy into discussions about the “problem of ‘obesity’”
- Understand that being fat is not the worst thing in the world; body fat does not define the worth of anyone
- Your homework
 - the next time you see a story about ‘obesity’ take a moment... and mind that gap

Thank you to U3A Wellington City

A generous scholarship from U3A
Wellington City has enabled me to be
here today.

For information about University of the Third
Age (U3A) Wellington City please go to
<https://u3awellingtoncity.org.nz/>

References

Bartky, S. (1988). *Foucault, femininity and the modernization of patriarchal power*. In I. Diamond & L. Quinby (Eds.), *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on resistance* (pp. 61-86). Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Bennett, T., (2015). *Mind the Gap: Toward a Political History of Habit* (Lecture, Victoria University of Wellington)

Burgard, D., 2015. Association for Size Diversity & Health
<https://healthateverysizeblog.org/category/asdah/>

Dupuis, C. A., Chamberlain, K., & Cain, T. (2014). *Bound bodies: Navigating the margins of fat bodies and clothes*. In C. Forth, & A. Leitch (Eds.) *Fat: Culture and Materiality*, (pp. 123 - 139). London: Bloomsbury.

Fat image: www.dreamstime.com Image: 46916338

Obesity image: www.shutterstock.com Image 257599966

Cake girl image: playstationallstars.wikia.com