

## My ‘Fat Girl Complex’: a preliminary investigation of sexual health and body image in women of size

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Women of size who inhabit non-normative bodies may have different experiences with body image and sexual health than women of average body size. In this exploratory study, we interviewed four women of size recruited from a larger mixed-methodological study of body image and sexuality. Each woman was interviewed twice on topics of body image, sexuality and sexual health. Reconstructive Horizon Analysis was used to analyse the content of the interviews. Women who expressed that their bodies had inherent personal and social value regardless of size did not articulate connections between body size and their sexual health. However, those women who looked externally for validation of their attractiveness struggled with acceptance of their sexuality and bodies and spoke of ways in which their body size and appearance hindered them from having the sexually healthy lives that they wanted. Findings highlight two important components of women’s sexual health as participants related them to body image: the right to pleasure and the right to engage only in wanted sexual activity. Participants described how negative body attitudes affected both of these aspects of their sexual health. Interventions targeting weight-based stigma may offer a means of indirectly promoting sexual health and autonomy in women.

**Keywords:** women of size; sexual health; body image; weight; size acceptance

### Introduction

Theorists have long characterised the body as a material object and a site of inscribed social meaning (Bourdieu 1977; Foucault 1979). Women’s bodies are particular sites for inscription and reading (Reischer and Koo 2004), given the extent to which many women’s self-worth is tied in with their perceptions of their attractiveness (Patrick, Neighbors, and Knee 2004). The confluence of women’s bodies being socially inscribed and their appearance acting as a mediator of self-worth has led to the creation of a literature around ‘body image’, which comprises the degree of investment in one’s appearance and others’ reactions to it and an evaluative body satisfaction/dissatisfaction component (Cash 2002).

Though body image as a construct is not gender-specific, literature on its correlates is overwhelmingly focused on women’s experiences. Women’s encounters of being treated ‘as bodies’ are central to Objectification Theory (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997), which

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posits that being subject to a constant evaluative gaze leads women to view themselves as objects through the lens of an outside observer (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). As thinness rather than health has been described as the most valued physical attribute in women (Bordo 1993; Hesse-Biber 2007a), self-objectification, body dissatisfaction and the desire to change one's body to more closely meet very thin cultural ideals are normative among women in Western culture (Striegel-Moore and Frankel 2002; Hesse-Biber 2007a). Although sexual objectification is not confined solely to one gender, race or sexual orientation (Teunis 2007), it is studied most frequently in heterosexual, younger, white women who are closer to having socially-constructed 'acceptable' bodies. Through the process of self-objectification, women of non-normative size may perceive themselves as being viewed negatively, which can have extensive implications for sexual experiences.

Both body dissatisfaction and self-objectification have been found to be related to sexuality outcomes in women. Women with more negative body image present lower levels of sexual desire and arousability (Sanchez and Kiefer 2007; Seal, Bradford, and Meston 2009), less frequent sexual initiation or sexual avoidance (Ackard, Kearney-Cooke, and Peterson 2000; Wiederman 2000) and decreased pleasure, orgasm and sexual satisfaction (Weaver and Byers 2006; Pujols, Meston, and Seal 2010). Negative body image often co-occurs with engaging in behaviours that may increase the risk for sexually transmitted infections, HIV transmission or unintended pregnancy: unprotected sexual activity with casual partners, not using condoms or contraceptives or intoxication prior to or during sexual activity (Wingood et al. 2002; Gillen, Lefkowitz, and Shearer 2006). However, living in a large body (which does not necessarily co-occur with body dissatisfaction) and relationships to sexuality have been underexplored.

Multiple theorists have devoted discussion to the ways in which fat women have been desexualised (Brazier 2001; Murray 2004). In recent years a social movement has arisen to counter the negative social experiences of individuals of larger body size. Size Acceptance has the goal of decreasing negative bodily regard and increasing acceptance of one's body as it currently is, rather than focusing on weight loss (International Size Acceptance Association 2011). A woman resisting self-objectification may have a different perception of her appearance to others and a different reaction to a partner's attraction to her and may experience a more integrated and satisfying sexually healthy self.

In this preliminary study, we used critical qualitative methods to explore what meanings women of size made of their lived experiences and how their bodies acted and were acted upon sexually. By 'critical', we mean that this perspective serves to highlight inequities and sites of disparity that run through the lives of participants (Kincheloe and McLaren 1994). We used semi-structured interviews on bodily feelings and sexual experiences to uncover participants' situated knowledges and experiences as a means of understanding the social world (Carspecken 1996; Hesse-Biber 2007b; Denzin and Lincoln 2008). These interviews were from a larger mixed-methods study assessing sexual behaviours and body image in women of all body sizes. Participants in the larger study completed both cross-sectional and daily diary measures, whose results are discussed elsewhere (Satinsky et al. 2012). A subset of 20 participants completed telephone interviews. We analysed data from the four women who specifically identified themselves as being women of size. This convenience sample was not representative but, rather, reflected one subset of participants whose characteristics (self-proclaimed large size and motivated interest) were deemed as particularly salient for the analysis at hand. We hope with these preliminary findings to begin further theoretical exploration of the sexual experiences of women of size and to offer some initial insight.

## Methods

### *Participant recruitment*

During March, 2010, recruitment advertisements stating that researchers at the authors' university were conducting a study of women's body image and sexual health were posted to Internet listservs, inviting women to visit the study website, read study information and an informed consent statement and decide whether they wanted to participate. At the end of the initial study questionnaire, participants were asked whether they would like to be interviewed twice, once on body image and once on sexuality. A total of 20 women were each interviewed twice for the larger study. Four women explicitly identified as women of size without prior prompting and the interviews from these four women were chosen for this analysis.

### *Data collection*

Interviews were semi-structured and comprised of non-leading questions (questions are displayed in Table 1). The first author conducted digitally-recorded interviews during March and April, 2010, using Skype. All participants agreed to a second interview at the conclusion of the first. Second interviews were completed within 10 days of the first interview. Interviews ranged from 24 minutes to 1 hour and 5 minutes, with most falling in the 40–50-minute range.

Verbatim transcriptions of the interviews were combined with field notes to create a thick record (Carspecken 1996). Participants were assigned pseudonyms and all personal information was redacted to maintain confidentiality.

### *Analytical framework*

The goal of analysis was to begin an exploration of the little-known experiences of women of size regarding their sexuality and self-image.

Table 1. Interview schedule.

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#### Interview 1 (Body Image Topics)

##### *Lead-off questions*

So tell me a little about your history with weight loss dieting? When did you first try it, and who suggested it?

Tell me about an experience that you can remember when what you looked like was really important to you. How did you prepare? Who was involved?

Do you have a sense of how your mother felt about her own body?

Tell me about a time that you feel you received very positive reactions to your appearance. Who was reacting? What was the situation? How did you perceive it as positive?

Are there things you feel you have to do appearance-wise before walking out the door or seeing a partner or friends? What are these? Why are they important?

#### Interview 2 (Sexuality Topics)

##### *Lead-off questions*

'Sexy' can look different to different people. So let's do some word association. If you were asked to answer that question, what would your response be? What is sexy to you?

If you could wave a magic wand and have what you considered to be an ideal sex life, what would be different than the way your sex life is now?

Tell me about your most recent sexual experience, either with a partner or by yourself. How did that experience make you feel during? How did you feel after? Tell me how it started?

Tell me about a sexual experience that you think went really badly. What made it bad? If you could change anything about that experience, what would it be?

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The unit of analysis as described by Carspecken (1996) is truth claims made by a participant in order to communicate about the world she lives in, what ‘works’ in that world and what she considers to be true about herself, others and the culture at large. Drawing on critical theory (Habermas and McCarthy 1985a, 1985b), truth claims people make are always set within a constellation of related, assumed validity claims. Articulating the implicit claims makes it possible to critique or call into question the constellation of assumptions. According to Habermas and McCarthy (1985a, 1985b), Carspecken (1996) and Dennis (2009), validity claims can be analysed according to their objectivity, subjectivity, normativity, and identity aspects. Reconstructive Horizon analysis (RHA) (Carspecken 1996) is a method ideally suited to this task. Reconstructive Horizon analysis focuses on two aspects of validity claims: (1) the background/foreground assumptions and the (2) types of claims being made. Backgrounding and foregrounding refer to the implicit and explicit assumptions salient to the meaning of the participant’s claims. An example of this might be a participant’s statement that ‘I really don’t like my body’. A foregrounded claim is that the participant feels negatively about her body. A more backgrounded claim might be that her body doesn’t meet certain body standards. One claim is clearer in terms of the participant’s speech act, however the backgrounded claim is also part of the speech act’s meaning.

### *Coding*

We coded speech acts that seemed as if they might have deeper meaning, (e.g., a participant stating ‘a woman should care about her appearance’) with simple labels that captured chunks of pragmatic meaning. Examples of these codes are: ‘There are places I don’t belong because I’m fat;’ and ‘I want others to feel better about themselves.’ For each code, we listed instances in the data indicating where the code occurred, a brief example and whether the claim was backgrounded or foregrounded, with a goal of having a mix of highly backgrounded and highly foregrounded claims.

### *Analysis of codes*

We organised initial codes into ‘supercodes’ based on similarity and shared meaning. Examples of these are the codes ‘having sex with me is proof that my partner is attracted to me’ and ‘others’ opinions of my body and appearance matter to me’ being combined into the supercode ‘I look externally to validate my attractiveness’. We termed relations between and among supercodes ‘themes’. This allowed us to analyse meaningful acts within an individual’s data and to look across participants’ data. We analysed each individual’s two interviews together before comparing across participants.

### *Validity checks*

In order to address validity concerns, we used digital recording devices to ensure consistency and reliability of transcription. We developed the interview schedule with the goal of being non-leading, reducing the chance that participants would be biased toward a particular response. To address participants’ ability to be honest and open, central to the critical qualitative project (Carspecken 1996), we interviewed each participant more than once. This allowed participants to feel more comfortable being interviewed and for us to explore contradictions and consistencies in each participant’s narratives. In addition, as sexual health topics can be sensitive for some to discuss, having an initial interview

covering less ‘loaded’ topics might allow participants to feel more comfortable with the interview process as well as give them time to continue thinking about these topics between interviews (Whittier and Melendez 2004).

Following analysis, we performed two additional validity checks. Two individuals not involved with the research project checked for systematic bias in the coding (peer debriefing). They read through transcripts and coding, offered any claims missing from analysis and indicated coding that seemed not to represent participants’ views. All coding discrepancies were noted, discussed and resolved. Concurrently, we asked participants to engage in Member Checks by emailing the participant two meaning-dense portions of the transcript, followed by our interpretation of the passages. We asked members to read through the interpretations and offer corrections or clarifications. All four participants responded to requests for Member Checks. Each indicated via email that they felt the interpretation offered of their speech acts were true to the meanings they intended to convey.

## Findings

### *Participants*

DeeDee was a 23-year-old White, lesbian-identified woman who was currently single. She referred to her size as ‘fat’, and weighed 340 pounds.

Shari was a 27-year-old White, bisexually-identified woman who was currently in a relationship with a man. She referred to her size as ‘overweight’, and weighed 350 pounds.

Ricky was a 37-year-old Black, lesbian and bisexually-identified woman who was currently in a relationship with a woman. She referred to her size as ‘big’, and weighed 295 pounds.

Lane was a 37-year-old White, heteroflexibly-identified<sup>1</sup> woman who was married to a man. She referred to her body size as ‘fat’, and weighed 225 pounds.

### *Foundational backgrounded/shared themes*

Participants’ responses produced a number of themes, which are explained in more detail below and are displayed in Table 2.

#### *I recognise the cultural expectation for women’s bodies*

All four women referenced the cultural-level ‘thin’ ideal to which women are expected to conform. When Lane discussed how she felt about her body in high school, she noted:

I remember like knowing that I did not look the way that it was acceptable to look to a certain extent ...

Table 2. Body image and sexual health themes discussed by participants.

Foundational/backgrounded shared themes
(1) I recognise the cultural expectations for women’s bodies
(2) I have a non-normative body
(3) Sexiness = self-confidence
Differential themes
(1) I look internally for validation of my attractiveness
• I know what I want sexually
(2) I look externally for validation of my attractiveness
• My discomfort with my body impacts my ability to be sexual

Similarly, DeeDee, in discussing a project she was doing for a class noted:

... at least 75% of diet commercials. ... In order to be loved you have to be thin. ... They're telling us that we're fat, and worthless, and because of that we don't get love, which is just bogus.

Despite both women questioning the validity of cultural-level body ideals, they reacted to those ideals quite differently, as discussed below.

#### *I have a non-normative body*

All four participants explicitly noted that they inhabited non-normative bodies. Both Lane and DeeDee identified themselves as 'fat' in opposition to more euphemistic phrases around body size. Both identified themselves as being adherent to Size Acceptance principles, which attempt to reclaim the word 'fat' as a neutral signifier. Lane said:

... but you know, I'm a fat person, and I identify as fat. I do not identify as chubby, or large, or heavy, or fluffy. I'm fat.

DeeDee's description of herself is almost an echo of Lane's:

So, I, I kind of steer away from all those uh, synonyms like curvy, fluffy, big-boned. I'm like, no I'm fat.

The dissonance DeeDee experienced between her feelings and her adherence to Size Acceptance principles is described further below.

#### *Sexiness = self-confidence*

When we asked participants 'What is sexy?', rather than discussing any physical attribute, all made the claim that sexiness is an attitude of self-confidence. When asked what she thinks is sexy, Shari stated:

I think it doesn't have as much to do with looks, and it has to do with someone's attitude. ... It's more how they carry themselves, their attitude towards themselves.

Ricky pointed to female pop culture figures as examples of personifying sexiness:

Beyonce's still vicious. ... So, yeah, I can see like super long legs, super giant butt, smaller waist, that general kind of what the rest of the world thinks is sexy, I guess. But then there's a lot of that attitude, too. ... like, 'Watch me, I'm the shit'.

Ricky acknowledges how Beyonce meets physical standards for sexiness but that it's her attitude that made Ricky put her in the 'sexy' category.

The four participants took these three agreed-upon ideas about how their worlds worked and synthesized them differently. All were living in larger bodies and knew that these do not meet beauty standards. They all stated that what truly made an individual attractive or sexy was not their appearance but, rather, their attitude toward themselves. However, when applying these claims to their own bodies, participants differed. What distinguished one pair from the other was the source from which participants received validation of her own sexual attractiveness.

#### *Contingencies of self-worth and attractiveness*

##### *I look internally for validation of my attractiveness*

Ricky and Lane both expressed that they relied on their own judgment to determine their attractiveness. Lane remarked that attraction and attractiveness were highly idiosyncratic and individual:

What people find attractive, and what people like to look at, it's so subjective. Obviously, I'm married to a guy who finds me attractive, and so they're out there.

Lane asserted the existence of a group of people who are attracted to larger bodies, rather than presenting her husband as an anomaly for being attracted to her. She then said that at no point historically did she feel sexually or socially unworthy. When we asked about why she had never succumbed to the pressure to diet, Lane highlighted her internal strength and her desire not to conform:

I've always been kind of stubborn, and kind of independent, so I'm not incredibly keen on doing something just because everybody else is doing it, and also, I like to eat!

Ricky similarly felt no need to doubt others' attractions to her. In her interviews, much of the conversation was about how clothing that accentuates her body such as her favourite pair of pants, make her feel especially confident:

But the pants themselves, it's seriously all booty, like it's booty with a bull's-eye pointing to my butt in bling. So then I just feel really amazing and my friend and my partner were walking behind me at the mall and they're like, 'Wow, those pants do make your ass look amazing.' And I'm like, 'I know, right. It's so great'.

Ricky fully accepted compliments from others about her appearance, and acknowledged how compliments aligned with her sense of herself. In contrast to Lane, Ricky was not explicitly stating that others' opinions of her body don't matter to her, but that that approbation matched her already existing attitude toward her body.

Ricky also spoke of the way she felt sexual, with or without a partner. While having a conversation with her partner, her partner expressed how she had noticed how comfortable Ricky was with her sexuality. Ricky described her feelings as:

I mean there's just a certain attitude that is there and it's really goes really, really deep when you're feeling really good ... like I don't need to have sex with other people because I am the embodiment of sex.

She explained that there are some things that help her to feel good, none of which were associated with others' reactions to her appearance: her clothing, eating a good meal, having a good night's sleep. She did notice that others seemed to respond to her positively when she was feeling secure and sexy but, once again, she interpreted these responses as confirmation of her already existing attitude about herself.

Ricky talked about how women in her family and the culture she grew up in as a Black woman in the Midwest helped guide her feelings around women's bodies:

Well, I'm Black and I'm from a family of really gigantic women. ... I think it's the cultural thing because I was a little girl, I had mom, my grandma, and my great grandma and they were all huge, beautiful women ...

Ricky saw Black culture as interceding between her family members and the standards of women's bodies in the larger White American culture. Being around these women made Ricky wish for getting bigger, to hold her own with the women in her family.

#### *I look externally for validation of my attractiveness*

Shari grew up in a home where her body was frequently criticised. When asked, 'So, growing up, did you have a lot of conversations with members of your family about body size or body image?' her response was 'Other than getting yelled at and told I was fat? Not really.' This treatment made her 'even more reclusive' and afraid of meeting new people.

Shari made multiple statements about her decision not to care about what others think of her. However, when asked about her current experiences, she expressed fear about weight-based judgment either by new friends or potential partners. At one point she stated, 'I don't let my weight tell me that I can't do something. . . . I've never let it do that.' But this statement was made in opposition to others made during the interview where she said that she's 'not very good with meeting new people', because:

I'm afraid of what people think of me, think of my weight . . . I'm no longer ashamed of how I look to other people, and it's getting to a point where, you know, if you don't like me, that's your problem, not mine.

However, she followed this comment immediately with 'You know, I've got those who do like me, who do find me attractive, and I don't need them [other people] anymore, you know?'

DeeDee similarly was battling with two senses of herself. She was very self-aware and articulate about the skirmishes she faced between her body and the outside world. DeeDee identified as a body image activist and had lead discussions about improving body image among women at her university. Despite how important it was to her that others feel good about themselves, she expressed:

I'm like, 'Woo hoo! Fat people rule' and 'Fat Power!' And I can say that until I'm blue in the face, but . . . I still have – I call it my 'Fat Girl Complex' – where I'm just like no matter what it is, I'm fat, and the rest of the world sees me differently, and I'm fed all these images, and all these um, messages saying because I'm fat I'm worthless . . .

Although logically DeeDee was politically aligned with Size Acceptance, her 'Fat Girl Complex' reminded her that the rest of the world was not size-accepting. Her non-normative body and her feelings about it kept her off-balance and very aware of how others were looking at her and judging her appearance:

It's just like I have to have this whole, um, this this, film, this bubble around me where everyone is watching me, and judging me basing on like how I exercise . . . what I eat. . . . So, um, I try to be very positive, but again, like at the end of the day it just, it just doesn't work.

When asked 'What is the sexiest thing about you?' during the course of their interviews, DeeDee and Shari both asserted that 'sexy' was not how they would describe themselves. DeeDee said, 'But . . . it's, it's really hard for me to say, like, "yeah, I'm sexy." It goes against everything that I've, that I've been taught and so on.' Shari bluntly said 'I don't think there's anything sexy about me.'

Shari had been in her current relationship less than a year and she discussed how her boyfriend (T) has helped her body image. She mentioned her initial misgivings about believing in her boyfriend's attraction to her:

[S]o I mean, I've had my issues with T as far as um, believing that T is attracted to me . . . because of my weight, and my size, and the way I look.

Shari now believed that T loves her and that attraction is part of that love. At later points, she implied that T loved her *in spite of* her appearance and rather than being explicitly attracted to what she looked like, T managed to love her because her body 'you know, doesn't bother him'. Shari insightfully describes how she knows she shouldn't be deriving self-worth from her boyfriend:

I know . . . it really shouldn't be dependent on a guy or whatever, but at the same point in time, you know, everybody wants someone to find them attractive and to love them.

She expressed concern that 'if I were to break up with T, or whatever, and was trying to find someone else, then, yes, I think my weight would come back into play.' The



implication is that T was an anomaly in wanting to be intimate with her and that she shouldn't expect the same treatment from other partners – she had been 'lucky with [her] boyfriend.'

DeeDee had also had partners who had tried to convince her of their attraction to her. She recalled her ex-boyfriend saying:

... he would be like 'No, I want to see you. I want to see *you*.' And I was just like 'What? No you don't. You don't want to see me naked, it's not a pretty sight ...'

DeeDee was unable to understand her boyfriend's perspective:

[Y]ou know, it's still weird to think about that he would want to see me naked and find that attractive or turn him on. That was just like, foreign, crazy, freakish I guess.

### *Sexual health and pleasure*

With regards to their own sexual health and sex lives, all four women were explicit about feeling sexual desire. When asked what might make their sex lives better, all replied with some variation of 'having sex more often'. Whether or not a participant felt like she was sexy, she expressed a desire for more frequent partnered sexual activity.

#### *I know what I want sexually*

Both Lane and Ricky spoke about their expectations that potential sexual partners would focus on their pleasure. Lane spoke extensively about the great sexual relationship she has with her husband and how she deserved to be the centre of her sex partner's attention:

I want to be number one. I want to be the most important person or thing in my significant other's life, because I make them that in mine.

Ricky stated that one has to 'audition 20 [sex partners] just to find one that's decent in bed'. Her implication was that being sexual with her is worth the effort – people will line up for the opportunity. She went on to describe a frustrating sexual encounter with a new partner where she disliked his technique and became a bit bored: 'I went back to sleep. Yeah, I was just like, "Yeah, I'm over it, sorry."' Because Ricky placed her pleasure and sexual needs at the centre of the sexual experience, once the encounter stopped being pleasurable, she cut it off.

#### *My discomfort with my body impacts my ability to be sexual*

In contrast to Lane and Ricky's high expectations for pleasure in sexual encounters, both Shari and DeeDee discussed how their initiations into heterosexual sexual intercourse and subsequent sexual experiences were not to their benefit. In DeeDee's relationship with her ex-boyfriend, she began having intercourse because her partner wanted to. She expressed how their sexual relationship was bad both because she was new to intercourse, and because her partner determined when and how frequently they would have sex:

[E]very time he would come over, we would have sex. You know, I like sex like just as much as the next person, but that was just getting kind of ridiculous because it felt like, oh, I'm just here to have sex with you ...

DeeDee did not express her discomfort to her ex, as she 'do[es]n't really like to rock the boat too much'. The relationship, 'it was just, it was just bad. I wouldn't express to him that I feel uncomfortable or I'm done. I just wouldn't say anything. I don't really know why.' DeeDee's discomfort can be contrasted with Ricky's description of her bad sexual

experience. DeeDee did not feel empowered to make her own emotional and sexual needs known in the context of her relationship.

DeeDee also talked about how she currently felt disconnected from her sexual body. In discussing masturbation, she said she used vibrators in part because she didn't enjoy touching herself as it made her feel negatively about her body. She stated that while masturbating:

Like, I don't, I don't look down. I look at the ceiling and I try to – it's almost like I'm trying to imagine that I was thinner. Like, imagine that my stomach was flatter or something like that, which sounds bizarre, but I guess that's what I'm trying to do.

Shari's first sexual partner made an issue of her weight. When she was 16 she had sexual intercourse for the first time with an older boy, after a couple of months of them meeting and kissing. After she had sex with him for the first time:

[U]m, one of my friends seen him at a store, and said something, I guess, about us dating, or whatever, and he said something to the extent of not dating a fat, nasty pig.

She then wryly made the statement, 'That didn't make me feel very good at all. Um, it didn't help with my sexual health at all.' She went on to talk about her sexual experiences following this one, and how her feelings about her body and her weight drove her sexual behaviours:

But at one point, um, my body image; you know, my opinion of myself was so low that I was actually on a Web site online meeting guys randomly that I'd never met before, just to have sex.

Shari described her boyfriend as being loving, and affectionate, the opposite of what she sought from men she met online. She stated how her relationship with her boyfriend only made her feel better about herself sexually. But she also acknowledged that if her relationship with T were to end, she might end up back where she started prior to meeting him.

What we see in DeeDee and Shari's narratives of their sexual experiences are the outcomes of a fatphobic and weight-stigmatizing culture seeping into the social and sexual realms of women's lives. Although Lane and Ricky are similarly immersed in this same culture, their resistance to sexual objectification seems to allow them to experience an embodied, pleasure-centered sexuality that has historically eluded DeeDee and Shari.

## **Discussion**

Sexual experiences and attitudes ranged widely within this group of women of size. Each woman spoke frankly about her sexual subjectivity and perceptively offered insight into both her corporeality and sexual health. Although we clearly cannot make statements about the universality of participants' claims from such a small sample, there were interesting confluences and disjunctures spanning participant stories that can begin to illuminate the lived experiences of a group whose voices are not frequently heard with regards to sexuality. Several distinct aspects of women's sexual health emerged from participants' narratives and these are outlined below.

### ***Entitlement to pleasure***

The reasons Lane and Ricky gave for living as embodied sexual women were different, but could both be attributed to internal compasses of attractiveness. Lane credited her non-conformity, while Ricky discussed growing up in a Black family where large women were valued. Lane was told repeatedly that she was too big, but she was able to reconstruct a

non-objectifying sense of self built upon Size Acceptance principles. Lane's experience in particular mirrors Gailey's (2012) findings that 'fat pride' may improve sexual experiences for fat women. Both women discussed how self-confidence and self-assurance constituted the major component of sexiness and, therefore, both considered themselves to *be sexy*. The state of their sexual health could be described as positive: they felt they deserved sexual pleasure from partners and felt able to say 'yes' or 'no' to sexual experiences.

On the other hand, DeeDee's story about masturbation and her inability to touch her own body sexually was particularly jarring in its illustration of the damage negative bodily feelings can inflict on entitlement to pleasure. Her disconnection from her body in moments when pleasure should have been central highlights the implications for the sexual health of fat women living in a fat-shaming culture.

### *Variable connections between body image and sexual health*

Lane and Ricky did not explicitly mention a connection between body image and their sexual health. Since they both identified as having non-normative bodies, we might have expected that body dis/satisfaction would come into play in stories they told about their sex lives. However, the acceptance and love each expressed for their bodies was foundational and privileged over interpersonal and cultural objectification and was not directly tied to their sex lives from their perspective.

DeeDee and Shari saw their turbulent relationships with their appearances as immediately connectable to their sexual expression. These intelligent women felt pulled in two directions: they acknowledged how they *should* feel about themselves, expressing disdain for unrealistic expectations placed on their bodies. However, their ability to see themselves as sexually viable women was hampered by the deeply embedded negative messages they'd internalized about larger female bodies, which kept them from truly believing in others' attraction to them. They looked outwardly for approbation and acceptance, however when it arrived, internalised body negativity kept them from being able to accept it. Their level of reliance on others to determine their feelings about their sexuality kept them dependent and made their sexual happiness and health externally contingent. It is this ambivalence and dependence that might offer a space for intervention to improve women's sexual experiences. Specifically, encouraging body appreciation may improve positive sexual function (Satinsky et al. 2012), as well as impact women's sexual assertiveness in partnered situations.

### *Saying 'yes' or 'no' to sexual experiences as related to body image*

DeeDee's experiences highlight what may be the most significant negative sexual outcomes that participants discussed: engaging in sexual activity that participants deemed regrettable, dangerous, or uncomfortable. DeeDee's lack of sexual self-assertiveness echoed the findings of Wiederman (2000) and Yamamiya, Cash, and Thompson (2006) in that worse sex-specific contextualised body image was associated with less confidence in refusing sex and lower levels of sexual assertiveness. Therefore, researchers may want to explore further the connections between sexual 'wantedness' and dependence on partners for appearance validation.

Gillen, Lefkowitz and Shearer (2006) found that young adult women's evaluating their appearance negatively was related to risky sexual behaviour. Shari spoke of sexual encounters that she now viewed as regrettable: sexual trysts with 'random' men that she attributed to her low opinion of herself, implying that if she had felt more self-confident,

she might not have sought out this type of partner. Though having casual sexual encounters is not inherently problematic, Shari presented these sexual events as lamentable.

### *Self-objectification versus size acceptance*

Shari and DeeDee struggled with divesting themselves of controlling body standards. Shari was further along in not caring about external judgment with her boyfriend's help, but knew that her hard-earned self-confidence was tenuous because of its dependence on external validation. DeeDee, on the other hand, was invested in Size Acceptance and hoped to move toward more radical body acceptance. Women involved with Size Acceptance who feel most strongly that society needs to view larger women more positively tend to have higher levels of self-acceptance and self-esteem (McKinley 2004; Sisseem and Heckert 2004). However, DeeDee was not able to truly embrace Size Acceptance. Therefore, in contrast with Gailey's participants (2012), in DeeDee's case the disruptive voice of Size Acceptance was not enough to block out the punishing fat-phobic gaze to which DeeDee felt subjected.

### *Intersectionality in participant narratives*

The axes of race and sexual identity appeared intermittently in participant narratives. Ricky was the only self-identified woman of colour and she drew explicit relationships between the Black family she grew up in and her attitudes toward her body. The implications for how race related to her sexual identity as a Black lesbian were not highlighted, which may be because the interviewers did not explicitly attempt to draw this out. Wilson discusses the necessity for health-promotion interventions that specifically benefit black lesbian and bisexual women of size, (2009a) as well as the variations in sexual scripts for black lesbians (2009b), and further research into the role racial identities play in the lives of women of size is warranted. For all other participants, whiteness remained an unmarked category in their stories.

Though unintentional in participant selection, all four women identified with some aspect of queer sexuality. Despite this, participants made no specific identity claims about non-heterosexuality, nor did they touch upon the gender of their partners. Though there has been a long history of queer identity threaded through fat acceptance (Hill 2009), shame in fatness can co-exist with pride in queerness (Cooper 2009, as cited in Saguy 2012). Our participants did not raise these tensions explicitly or implicitly, but we did not probe them for these interactions in particular.

### *Attitude change instead of body size change*

It is notable that no participants mentioned weight loss as a way to improve their sex lives. The evidence regarding the relationship between actual body size and sexual satisfaction is mixed, with some finding that body-mass index (BMI) has little to do with sexuality (Kaneshiro et al. 2008; Satinsky et al. 2012) and others reporting that higher BMIs negatively impacted sexual function scores (Esposito et al. 2007; Larsen, Wagner, and Heitmann 2007). Many of these studies have concluded that weight loss is a means of improving sexual function (Larsen et al 2007; Kolotkin et al. 2008). However, in our in-depth examination of four women who all identified as being in the upper ranges of the BMI, even those who felt negatively about themselves did not suggest weight loss as a means of improving their sexual experiences. Rather, they spoke of a need to feel better

about their material bodies as they were. We suggest promoting resistance to hegemonic negative views of larger bodies rather than promoting weight loss has the potential to make a greater impact on the sexual health of women of size. Specifically, interventions that serve to deconstruct weight-based stigma, which disproportionately affects women (Fikkan and Rothblum 2012), may be an indirect means of improving fully embodied, wanted sexual experiences in women.

## Conclusions

In part because body negativity is normative in Western women, researchers and theorists have assumed that larger body size is inherently problematic. However, for those fat women who do not problematise their bodies, fat corporeality may not be a hindrance to fully realized sexual subjectivity. Given that most fat women are subject to weight negativity and sexual objectification, we should not discount those many women for whom there is a direct relationship between these two realms. But what our analysis indicates that has not yet been present in the literature is a potential site of difference between women of size who have positive sexual health experiences and those who may not. Shari and DeeDee spoke about how their body size drove and undergirded their sexual behaviours, while Lane and Ricky seemed to be better able to integrate a sense of sexual subjectivity that did not rely on self-objectification. Returning to Objectification Theory, DeeDee and Shari's narratives reflect how taking an outsider's perspective, one who sees fat bodies as undesirable, disrupted not only their daily thought processes but also their interpersonal dynamics (interactions with past and current sexual partners). Given that messages around women's bodies are fractured and contradictory, being dependent on intrapersonal and cultural-level ideas around fat and women's bodies may leave women at the whim of things out of their own control.

Feminist researchers have critiqued body image improvement and/or sexuality interventions that focus solely on intrapersonal variables, leaving cultural-level oppressive messages intact (Bordo 1993; Gilbert and Thompson 1996). What our findings illuminate is how external messages are resisted or internalised and may be re-constituted interpersonally. This may offer a means for interceding in feedback loops between media messages, interpersonal interactions and individuals' expectations of their worth, which may be especially important in women of size.

The sample size of this study is a significant limitation, and our preliminary findings support further exploration of these topics with more participants. By more fully exploring the means and processes by which women experience both non-normative bodies and sexualities, practitioners and educators may be better able to implement programmes that can promote body positivity and reduce negative sexual health outcomes.

## Note

1. Lane described herself as being 'heteroflexible', meaning that though she's primarily attracted to, and in relationships with men, she remains open to attractions to and sexual experiences with women.

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## Résumé

Les femmes de forte corpulence qui habitent des corps non normatifs peuvent avoir une expérience de l'image de leur corps et de leur santé sexuelle différente de celle des femmes dont la corpulence est dans la moyenne. Dans cette étude exploratoire, nous avons interrogé quatre femmes de forte corpulence qui avaient été recrutées pour une étude multi-méthodes de plus grande ampleur sur l'image du corps et sur la sexualité. Chacune de ces femmes a été interrogée à deux reprises sur les sujets de l'image corporelle, de la sexualité et de la santé sexuelle. Le contenu des entretiens a été étudié conformément à l'analyse reconstructive de l'horizon prévisionnel (Reconstructive Horizon Analysis). Les femmes qui ont déclaré que leur corps avait une valeur intrinsèque personnelle et sociale, indépendamment de ses dimensions, n'ont pas fait part de perceptions sur des correspondances possibles entre leurs dimensions corporelles et leur santé sexuelle. Cependant les femmes qui cherchaient une validation externe de leur attractivité luttèrent pour accepter leur sexualité et leur corps, et ont indiqué comment leurs dimensions corporelles et leur apparence les empêchaient d'avoir les vies sexuelles saines qu'elles désiraient.

Nos résultats mettent en avant deux composantes importantes de la santé sexuelle des femmes, les participantes les ayant liées à l'image corporelle: le droit au plaisir et le droit à

l'engagement dans une activité sexuelle, seulement si celle-ci est désirée. Les participantes ont décrit comment les attitudes négatives vis-à-vis de leur corps affectaient ces deux aspects de leur santé sexuelle. Des interventions sur la stigmatisation en fonction du poids corporel pourraient offrir un moyen indirect de promotion de la santé sexuelle et de l'autonomie des femmes.

### **Resumen**

Las mujeres de talla grande, cuyos cuerpos exceden el tamaño del promedio de la población, pueden experimentar vivencias en relación a la imagen de su cuerpo o a la salud sexual que difieren de aquellas vividas por las mujeres con una talla de cuerpo más cercana al promedio. Para este estudio exploratorio, los autores entrevistaron a cuatro mujeres de talla grande, seleccionadas a partir de un estudio más amplio que empleó metodología mixta y estuvo centrado en la imagen corporal y en la sexualidad. Cada una de estas mujeres fue entrevistada dos veces con el fin de abordar los temas de imagen corporal, sexualidad y salud sexual. Para analizar el contenido de las entrevistas se utilizó el Reconstructive Horizon Analysis. Las mujeres que opinaron que sus cuerpos tienen un valor personal y social inherente, independiente de su talla, no trazaron una relación entre su talla corporal y su salud sexual. Sin embargo, aquellas que buscaban una validación externa de su atractivo físico luchaban para aceptar su sexualidad y su cuerpo, hablando de cómo la talla de sus cuerpos y la percepción de su atractivo les impedía tener las saludables vidas sexuales que querían tener. Los resultados del estudio subrayan dos elementos clave de la salud sexual femenina, de acuerdo a cómo las participantes los relacionan con la imagen corporal: el derecho al placer y el derecho a participar solamente en la actividad sexual deseada. Las entrevistadas describieron la manera en que una actitud corporal negativa afecta estos dos aspectos de su salud sexual. En conclusión, las intervenciones dirigidas a reducir el estigma basado en el peso pueden representar una manera indirecta de promover la salud sexual y la autonomía de las mujeres.



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