

**A qualitative exploration of whether lesbian and bisexual women are 'protected' from  
sociocultural pressure to be thin**

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## **Abstract**

Heterosexual women in Western cultures are known to experience body image concerns, dieting and disordered eating as a result of intense social pressures to be thin. However, it is theorised that lesbian and bisexual women belong to a subculture which is 'protective' of such demands. Fifteen non-heterosexual women were interviewed about their experiences of social pressure. Thematic analysis of their accounts suggests that such theorising may be inaccurate, because these lesbian and bisexual women did not feel 'protected' from social pressures and experienced body dissatisfaction. While they might attempt to resist thin idealisation, resistance is not centred around their sexuality.

## **Keywords**

Body image, body size, appearance, sexuality, qualitative methods

## Introduction

It is well documented that in Western society women are under social pressure to be considered 'beautiful' by being thin (Grogan, 2008). The media in particular has been criticised as depicting unrealistic and digitally-enhanced images of flawlessly thin women as appropriate ideals against which women should compare themselves (Grogan, 2008). However, such ideals are almost impossible for most women to healthily achieve (Tiggemann, 2002), and women's experiences of pressure to attain this ideal is linked to body dissatisfaction, dieting behaviours and eating disorders (e.g. Halliwell & Dittmarr, 2004; Mask & Blanchard, 2011; Unikel Santoncini, Martin Martin, Juarez Garcia, Gonzalez-Forteza, & Nuno Gutierrez, 2012).

Less well documented is the heteronormativity of current cultural ideals; the thin-but-curveaceous body that is very visible in the media (Lyons, 2000) is an expected component of normative heterosexual femininity (Ahern, Bennett, Kelly & Hetherington, 2011). Two authors have speculated how such ideals affect lesbian and bisexual women. First, lesbians, and possibly bisexual women, may be 'protected' from mainstream emphasis on thinness, and subsequent body dissatisfaction, because LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) communities<sup>1</sup> reject heteronormative ideals and are more accepting of diverse body sizes (Brown, 1987). An alternative perspective states that because lesbian and bisexual women are raised and live in mainstream society (with its emphasis on thinness and heteronormative femininity), they will internalise these beauty ideals and experience body dissatisfaction in the same way as heterosexual women (Dworkin, 1988).

A small body of quantitative research has primarily sought to identify similarities and differences between lesbian and heterosexual women (bisexual women have largely been

ignored in the literature to date). Lesbian and heterosexual women have generally reported equivalent levels of awareness of media pressure to be thin (e.g. Share & Mintz, 2002). However, there is far less clarity regarding body satisfaction; recent research has found no differences between lesbian and heterosexual women (e.g. Koff, Lucas, Migliorini & Grossmith, 2010), while a meta-analysis of sixteen earlier studies found that lesbian women were 'slightly' more satisfied with their bodies than heterosexual women (Morrison, Morrison & Sager, 2004). Similarly, some evidence suggests that lesbian women are less likely to engage in dieting behaviours than heterosexual women (e.g. Conner, Johnson & Grogan, 2004), while others have found no such differences (e.g. Share & Mintz, 2002). Much of this research is flawed, however, by significant differences in weight and age between lesbian and heterosexual participants that is not accounted for in analysis (Morrison et al., 2004) and by the extensive omission of bisexual women,

In summary, there is some evidence to suggest that lesbian women may feel 'protected' from heteronormative pressures to be thin. As such pressures are associated with unhealthy consequences, such as harmful feelings of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviours (e.g. Grogan, 2008), it is important to explore all potential avenues of resistance. However, findings from quantitative studies are inconsistent, and there is no clear indication as to how lesbian and bisexual women's body image concerns are affected by heteronormative social pressures. Qualitative inquiry is valuable in obtaining people's opinions and understanding the nature of their experiences (Gonzalez et al., 2012). Therefore this approach could produce insights that indicate whether (and why) lesbian and bisexual women feel

‘protected’ from such pressures, and how social pressures shape their body concerns and eating behaviours, however the views of lesbian and bisexual women have rarely been sought.

### *LGB communities and body satisfaction*

Existing qualitative research into lesbian and bisexual women’s body concerns comes predominantly from the USA, and focuses on LGB communities and the body-related messages they promote. Such research has suggested that Westernised LGB communities promote positive messages about weight and appearance; they endorse ‘healthier’ body ideals than mainstream society, such as an emphasis on physical fitness rather than extreme thinness (Beren, Hayden, Wilfley, & Striegel-Moore, 1997; Leavy & Hastings, 2010; Pitman, 2000), and are accepting of all body shapes and sizes (Cogan, 1999; Myers, Taub, Morris & Rothblum, 1999). Empirical work with bisexual women suggests that an engagement with LGB communities is positively associated with a decrease in concern with conformity to mainstream beauty ideals such as thinness (Taub, 2003).

However, Myers and colleagues (1999) suggested that many women who belong to LGB communities are not ‘protected’ from experiencing body-related concerns; they will still experience dissatisfaction with their body size and make attempts to lose weight. Rothblum (2002: 262) argued that the perception that lesbians are more tolerant of bodily diversity and less invested in appearance has become something of a norm within LGB communities and there is a ‘discrepancy between what lesbians feel they are supposed to believe about body image acceptance and what they do feel’ about their own bodies. Similarly, Kelly (2007) argued that because lesbian and bisexual women perceive that LGB communities promote body-

acceptance and do not idealise thinness (for women) they are deterred from discussing their body-focussed anxieties with each other. This silence creates the 'inaccurate' notion that lesbian and bisexual women have less body dissatisfaction than heterosexual women. To date, however, no research has explicitly explored lesbian and bisexual women's feelings about their body, and their perceptions of other non-heterosexual women's body image.

The current study aims to fill this gap in knowledge, and identify whether LGB communities are 'protective' of mainstream body-related pressures. This research will explore both lesbian and bisexual women's feelings towards their bodies, the social influences that affect these feelings, and their thoughts about whether non-heterosexual women (as a social group) are 'protected' from concerns about their body size and shape. To our knowledge, it is the first such study conducted outside the USA, and is the first study to explicitly ask these women to comment on whether LGB communities are 'protective' of their body concerns.

## **Method**

This study is part of the qualitative phase of a mixed-methods program of research into lesbian and bisexual women's body image (Huxley, 2010; Huxley et al., 2011, 2012). A semi-structured interview approach was selected to ensure that all participants were asked the same broad questions on the interview topics while simultaneously allowing flexibility so that participants could discuss issues not pre-determined by the researchers (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

### *Participants and recruitment*

Participants were recruited initially through purposive sampling of the researcher's personal and professional networks. Participants then snowballed the study information to their professional contacts, social groups and networks. Purposive and snowball sampling are commonly-used techniques for the recruitment of lesbian and bisexual women (Clarke, Ellis, Peel, & Riggs, 2010).

Fifteen non-heterosexual women living in primarily urban areas of the UK participated in the study. Participants were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym and describe their gender and sexuality in their own words (we use these terms when referring to the women). Eleven participants identified as 'lesbian' or 'gay', and four participants identified as 'bi' or 'bisexual'. Although most of the participants described their gender as 'female' or 'woman', one bisexual participant was 'undecided' of her gender. The age range was 18 to 69 years (the mean was 34.7 years), although ten women were aged 30 or under. Participants were predominantly middle-class ( $n = 9$ ), highly educated ( $n = 10$  educated to degree level or higher), and described themselves as white British or white Irish ( $n = 13$ , the remaining two participants described themselves as Jewish European).

### *Procedure*

This research was granted ethical approval by the University of the West of England's Health and Life Sciences Ethics Committee. The study was described to potential participants as an exploration of lesbian and bisexual women's feelings about their body and appearance. On initial enquiry, participants were given more detailed information about the study, what participation would involve and the uses to which their data would be put, and were informed

that the lead researcher (the first author) was a heterosexual woman who adhered to guidelines for non-heterosexist research (see Clarke et al., 2010; McClennen, 2003) and was supervised by a non-heterosexual woman (the second author). Explicit disclosure of this 'outsider' position has been found to encourage openness and trust between heterosexual researchers and non-heterosexual participants (Asher & Asher, 1999). Similarly, we found that the women appreciated our openness about the interviewer's sexuality, and our honesty helped us to build connections and rapport with the participants.

The interview guide was constructed from a review of relevant literature, and included questions that focussed on how participants felt about their body, and how different social environments and the media influenced these feelings. As part of the broader research project (Huxley, 2010), participants were also asked how romantic/sexual relationships shape their body-related feelings, and how different social environments influence their feelings towards their physical appearance, however, these aspects of the interviews have been analysed elsewhere (Huxley et al., 2011, 2012). After participants had been asked about their personal feelings towards their body size/shape, participants were explicitly asked to discuss whether they thought that lesbian and bisexual women as a social group experienced fewer social pressures than heterosexual women. We asked this in order to explore any discrepancies between the participants' own feelings and their views of other non-heterosexual women's feelings towards their body (Kelly, 2007).

The interviews were conducted in a location chosen by the participant (primarily their homes, but also social or workplace venues), lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. When quoting from the interviews we use an ellipsis to



signify a pause in speech, and a bracketed ellipsis to indicate our editing of the quote (such as removal of stuttering).

### *Data analysis*

The women's accounts were analysed by hand using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) within a broadly critical realist or contextualist framework (Willig, 1999). Our approach loosely conforms to the definition of critical realism as a position that:

'affirms the existence of "reality", both physical and environmental... but at the same time recognizes that its representations are characterized and mediated by culture, language, and political interests rooted in factors such as race, gender, or social class' (Ussher, 1999: 45).

In terms of our participants' sense-making, this approach allowed an analysis that takes such accounts at face value or as 'real' without rendering them independent of the historical, cultural, or political context in which they take place.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines, the first author read and re-read transcripts from the whole data set before individually coding them. These codes were then organised into initial themes. This initial analysis was then reviewed with the second and third authors, before being refined and organised into subthemes within overarching themes.

### **Results**

Four main themes were identified during the analysis: 'normative' body dissatisfaction; mainstream pressures; critiquing mainstream pressures; and pressures within LGB

communities. Discussion of these themes will be presented first, followed by participants' responses to being directly asked whether lesbian and bisexual women (more broadly) are protected from body dissatisfaction.

### *'Normative' body dissatisfaction*

Only a small number of women reported being relatively happy with their body size or shape, while all of the women described at least one aspect of their body that they disliked. Dissatisfaction with the body, or specific body parts, primarily focussed on size (too large), and such feelings were attributed to all women: 'I hate it if I have to get a [UK dress-size] twelve because I'm normally a ten. That's just women isn't it?' (Holly, 69 year old gay woman); 'my stomach, [like] every female, I would imagine, on the planet, I would like my stomach to be a little bit flatter' (Helen, 30 year old lesbian). The women thought that it was 'natural' and 'normal' for women to be unhappy with their bodies. The women's dissatisfaction with their body size influenced their clothing choices. This was particularly mentioned by the women who were unhappy with their weight, who felt that they had to wear large or unfashionable clothes. Several women described how they actively used clothes to hide their body size and weight (Frith & Gleeson, 2008) and became more self-conscious if their bodies could not be hidden.

Weight loss was described as a boost to self-confidence by a small number of women. A third of the women were currently dieting or exercising with the aim of losing weight or getting 'in shape', and three participants had engaged in disordered eating behaviours in the past. These women described how they would severely restrict their food intake and engage in behaviours congruent with a diagnosis of anorexia: 'I would say that I was never anorexic but I

would sometimes go for two or three days at a time without eating and... be proud of myself for that, and be trying to lose more weight and wanting to be thinner' (Isabel, 30 year old bi woman). Dieting and weight loss behaviours are often self-policed, and women may feel disappointed in themselves if they do not meet specific weight loss targets (Pacquette & Raine, 2004). This was reflected in some of the women's comments, when weight loss attempts were equated with being 'good':

'I do feel, I think like most women, they always feel, like, sort of half a stone overweight [...] I'll do it [diet] for a week, I'll be good and healthy and then it'll, you know, go up and down a lot' (Sally, 25 year old lesbian).

The effect that ageing has on the body was mentioned by all participants over the age of thirty, particularly in terms of failing functionality: 'I'm sort of fifty and I'm going through the menopause [...] I've got pernicious anaemia and things, so, I feel like my body's just falling apart' (Sylvia, 49 year old lesbian). However, Sookie (47 year old bisexual, undecided gender) emphasized that as she aged she was becoming more accepting of her body, even though it deviated further from cultural ideals: 'when you get older, you don't care as much about your appearance, although your body isn't, you know... it obviously goes downhill a little bit'. Such comments echo Tiggemann's (2004) findings that as women age they become less invested in their body, as they often prioritise other aspects of their lives (such as their career or motherhood).

### *Mainstream pressures*

The women all experienced mainstream social pressures to be thin, and the media idealisation of very slim women was frequently referred to in their discussions. For example, Mae (18 year old bisexual woman) desired to look as 'attractive' as film stars and actresses on television. She was unhappy with her current weight and said that she 'always feels the pressure of losing weight and being thinner'. Several women reported consciously comparing themselves and their body size to media images of thin 'beautiful' women. Although Rachel (62 year old lesbian) criticised the lack of older women portrayed in the media, she thought that, though not directly comparable, images of young women were 'still a kind of resource or image against which we might measure ourselves.' These comments reflect assertions that media images depicting slenderness as desirable are highly influential in promoting body dissatisfaction in women of all ages (Grogan, 2008).

The women were divided as to their current engagement with mainstream media; under half of the group reported active consumption of mainstream magazines and television. Such media was seen by most participants as heterosexist because of the invisibility of lesbian and bisexual women. Several women commented that media images were mainly aimed at heterosexual women because they often 'play on what is defined as feminine and sexy' (Sally, 25 year old lesbian), depicting a heteronormative femininity which is not congruous with stereotypical perceptions of 'butch' or androgynous lesbian women (Rothblum, 1994). Despite thinking that they were not specifically targeted, many women felt that media messages regarding body size did have a negative impact on them: 'it's either "this is the new diet" or "look how thin this person is" and unless you're thin and attractive, you know, you're not worth knowing [...] that does influence you' (Sally, 25 year old lesbian).

The media was the main focus of discussion around social pressures to be thin, however several women also described occasions where male partners or friends made negative comments about their weight. For example, Rachel (62 year old lesbian) described how her ex-husband referred to her body shape during arguments: 'I think he did use my body shape, er, you know, at times when he wanted to... humiliate me [...] it was more like a taunt that he could use if we were having a row or something' (Rachel, 62 year old lesbian); and Holly (69 year old gay woman) recalled being teased by a male friend: 'one of them said I was far too big. He used to call me "pear-drop bum". That's when I dieted, that was the reason why'. A small number of women also thought that their heterosexual friends talked about their body size and appearance more than their non-heterosexual friends. For example, Pat (27 year old lesbian) recalled how heterosexual friends often discussed their body size/weight but she 'hadn't ever had a similar conversation with lesbians'.

Such comments suggest that interpersonal pressures often originate from predominantly mainstream (heterosexual) sources. However, the source of such comments did not diminish their harmful effect. Jolim (27 year old lesbian) described how she was bullied because of her weight, and how her weight was the most salient source of stress:

'You're always going to get bullied for being a big girl, doesn't matter if you're gay, straight, bi, anything, you know. People see you as fat, they will call you fat. My weight has always been my, my one prime concern.'

### *Critiquing mainstream pressures*

Over half of the women were explicitly critical of mainstream idealisation of thinness. These women were particularly angry about the media's emphasis on slimness, and, in direct contradiction to comments made by women who were media consumers, actively tried to avoid media exposure wherever possible. These women discussed how unrealistic these ideals were, describing how images were often 'air-brushed' (digitally-enhanced). Helen's (30 year old lesbian) anger towards, and avoidance of, thin images in the media stemmed from personal experiences of using such images as a motivation to diet and lose weight (in the past, Helen was diagnosed with eating disorders including anorexia):

'it makes me angry that this is going on in the media and nobody's doing anything about it. [...] Erm, but previously, yes very much so it has affected me and I would, I would often have used, erm, skinny-looking people or athletic-looking people [...] to help me stay motivated to lose weight, to be thin, to be smaller'

The prioritising of physical health was presented as a method of resisting the social emphasis on thinness by some women. Desires to be slimmer were expressed in terms of desires to be 'healthy' or a 'healthy weight', while 'overweight' bodies were seen as undesirable because they were 'unhealthy', rather than because they do not meet cultural appearance ideals: 'I want to be healthy and if I gain weight then I start feeling like I'm getting out of breath running for the bus . . . that concerns me, but in terms of the aesthetics I don't really, I don't really care' (Laura, 27 year old bisexual woman). These women presented an emphasis on health as a resistance to mainstream idealisation of thinness. However, it could be argued that through the lens of health, these women still subscribed to the social ideal that thin

body shapes are desirable because they conflated thinness with healthiness (Gonzalez et al., 2012; Kwan, 2009).

Despite this reported critique of social pressures, there often seemed to be a discrepancy between the women's criticisms of cultural ideals and their feelings about their own bodies. Isabel (30 year old bi woman) described how she was actively critical of social pressures to be thin, but she acknowledged that since she was still dissatisfied with her body size, she was not exempt from their influence. Isabel suggested that cultural ideals are so pervasive that everyone is affected, even those who attempted to actively resist them: 'we've all internalised the pressures that society puts on us, whether we like to admit to that or not. Obviously it's nice to feel bigger than your culture and . . . societal influences, but none of us are really.' This discrepancy between cognitions about social ideals and emotions about personal body size suggests that critical attitudes towards sociocultural pressures do not necessarily protect women from feelings of body dissatisfaction.

#### *Pressures within LGB communities*

None of the women described becoming happier with their body size after 'coming out', and a small number of women felt that LGB communities were actually a source of pressures to be thin. Jolim (27 year old lesbian) considered herself to be 'overweight' and felt a pressure to lose weight after coming out. This pressure originated from a desire to make a positive impression on other non-heterosexual women. Similarly, Isabel (30 year old bi woman) described how most of her non-heterosexual friends were thin and she experienced a pressure to maintain her own thinness in order to 'fit in': 'I think that when I first started going out on

the scene most of the lesbians I was hanging out with were quite thin, and so I think that as part of fitting in I would want to maintain that thin ideal.’ In contrast, Tara thought that mainstream media were more influential in shaping her body concerns than LGB communities: ‘I think I was always more conscious of, like, comparing myself to, erm, you know like, people in magazines as opposed to other gay people, really’ (Tara, 23 year old gay woman).

Despite these comments, pressures from LGB communities predominantly focussed on physical appearance (i.e. hair style and clothing choices), which was manipulated in order to be recognized as lesbian/bisexual, and used as a method of identifying other non-heterosexual women (see Huxley et al., 2012).

#### *Are lesbian and bisexual women protected from body dissatisfaction?*

There was varied discussion about whether lesbian and bisexual women (as a social group) experience fewer body-related pressures than heterosexual women. Although some women agreed that they did, some thought there were no differences, and others acknowledged the complexities of the debate.

Support for the argument that non-heterosexual women are ‘protected’ from mainstream pressures (Brown, 1987) came primarily from a small number of bisexual women who were not currently involved, or invested, in LGB subculture. Assumptions that both lesbians and bisexual women are not invested in looking attractive to men underpinned much of this argument. For example, Laura (27 year old bisexual) argued that heterosexual women put themselves under pressure to be attractive to men:



‘a lot of the societal pressures about bodies and size and shape comes from . . . women wanting to look the way they think men want them to look, and if you’re taking men even partially out of the equation then that becomes a whole lot less important.’

Although Laura’s comments about the competing arguments were somewhat congruent with her discussion about her own body satisfaction (she was generally positive about her body), other women’s discussion was less harmonious. For example, Mae (18 year old bisexual woman) was unhappy with her body size and wanted to lose weight, however she suggested that LGB communities were removed from mainstream society, so therefore lesbian and bisexual women were removed from the emphasis on thinness. These comments reflect wider societal understandings that LGB communities are not concerned with thinness (Kelly, 2007).

In contrast, the lesbian women (many of whom were currently involved in LGB communities) argued that sexuality is irrelevant and stated that they did not feel ‘protected’ from social pressures because of an affiliation to lesbian subculture (Dworkin, 1988). Indeed, suggestions that lesbian women might experience less dissatisfaction with their bodies than other women were strongly rebuffed by Tove (39 year old lesbian):

‘I strongly believe that lesbians are under pressure around their body and appearance. I don’t think that, erm, they’re more relaxed. I think they’re... that the pressures just, just are experienced in different ways’.

Personal insecurities and individual differences were cited by several participants as having more of an influence on women’s body-related feelings than sexuality did: ‘the pressures, they’re there and how you respond to it isn’t, isn’t because you’re straight or gay, it’s because

of other things inside of that person' (Helen, 30 year old lesbian). Such comments are congruent with many of the women's feelings about their own body size/shape; LGB communities were very rarely mentioned during these discussions, and were actually referred to as a source of body-related pressure by some participants. This suggests that, for this group of women, such communities do not have a 'protective' influence on their body-related concerns.

Several other participants believed that this discussion was too simplistic. For example, Rachel (62 year old lesbian) thought that all women experienced the same pressures, regardless of sexuality, but that these pressures differed in severity: 'I think that it's the same kinds of pressures on everyone to look young and . . . thin, erm, but I think probably those pressures bear more heavily on straight women.' In terms of the potentially 'protective' nature of LGB communities, Isabel (30 year old bi woman) described how she did feel fewer pressures to be thin and attractive to men after she had come out as bisexual, but increasingly felt pressures to be slender in order to fit in with LGB social space which she perceived as endorsing the thin ideal. Isabel argued that while the source of body-size pressures changed, the nature of such pressures did not.

## **Discussion**

The current analysis concurs with some previous research in finding that lesbian and bisexual women are often unhappy with their body size (Myers et al., 1999) and may focus on physical fitness and health, rather than thinness as a beauty ideal (Beren et al., 1997; Leavy & Hastings, 2010). These women did not feel 'protected' from cultural expectations about their weight; all

experienced a degree of body dissatisfaction, and the majority of the participants did not think there were any differences between their own experiences and those of heterosexual women. These findings support Dworkin's (1988) assertion that all women will experience social pressure to be thin and will feel dissatisfied with their body size/shape.

LGB communities were not frequently mentioned in terms of influencing these women's feelings towards their body; the influences that were described as being most powerful were mainstream media pressures to be thin. Although these lesbian and bisexual women felt that the media is heterosexist and does not target them specifically, the media appears to be extremely important in conveying cultural ideals to all women. This might be because the media is a powerful and ubiquitous presence, and Western society is more media-saturated than ever before (Derenne & Beresin, 2006).

With one notable exception, the women's accounts of their own body satisfaction were generally congruous with their views on whether sexuality affects women's body image; those who explicitly thought that lesbian and bisexual women are offered 'protection' from body dissatisfaction (Brown, 1987) tended to describe more personal resistance to social pressures, than those who supported the view that all women were vulnerable to the same body image concerns (Dworkin, 1988). Although this suggests that both perspectives could be valid and are dependent on the individual, it is worth noting that the women who argued that LGB communities were 'protective' were 'outsiders' to such communities and those women who were involved and invested in LGB communities did not perceive any 'protective' effect.

While the women in this research were able to discuss their body-focussed concerns with the (heterosexual) researcher there was no suggestion that they talked about such

concerns with other non-heterosexual women. In the current research, then, the researcher's 'outsider' position as a heterosexual woman might have been beneficial, as the lesbian women might not have felt the need to maintain any expectations of body satisfaction. Understandings that body size concerns are 'a "straight woman's" problem' Pitman (2000: 59) could actually prevent lesbian or bisexual women from speaking to each other about their own body concerns, reinforcing the notion that lesbian and bisexual women are unconcerned with their body size or striving towards cultural ideals (Kelly, 2007). As all women are vulnerable to body dissatisfaction, broader social change is needed to reduce the emphasis on women's value as residing in their appearance, and to be more accepting of a wider range of body sizes (Paquette & Raine, 2004).

The current qualitative research highlights the complexity of the social influences that shape lesbian and bisexual women's body image. This complexity suggests that rather than simply identifying similarities and differences between lesbian and heterosexual women, future quantitative research, inclusive of bisexual women, should explore how different social and personal variables, such as engagement with (heterosexist) media that is pressurising about thinness, and affiliation to LGB communities, interact to shape different women's body image. Such research could produce a more comprehensive account of how sexual identity might relate to women's body image.

Negative social stereotypes (Geiger, Harwood & Hummert), expectations within health services that lesbians will be overweight (Fish, 2007a) and understandings that non-heterosexual communities are accepting of women of all shapes and sizes (Cogan, 1999), could influence the way in which health practitioners and researchers approach and engage with

lesbian and bisexual women. Our findings demonstrate that it is important that people who work with sexually diverse women are aware that they just as are prone to dissatisfaction with their body and to engage in associated dieting behaviours as other women. Furthermore, many lesbian and bisexual do not feel targeted by heterosexist health prevention measures and fear that they will be treated negatively by healthcare providers (Fish, 2007b). There is need to develop body acceptance interventions/health information that are inclusive of all women and do not reproduce heterosexist assumptions.

One of the limitations of this research is that the participants were a privileged group of predominantly young, White, middle-class lesbian and bisexual women. Such participants are often prevalent within LGB research (Morris & Rothblum, 1999). This is possibly a result of the purposive and snowball methods of recruitment; such samples often reflect the identity of the researcher (Dunne, 1997), and working-class lesbian or bisexual women are often 'invisible' within gay social networks (Clarke & Turner, 2007). Research has shown that black, Asian and other non-White women often experience tension between specific cultural appearance norms and the White beauty ideals of dominant culture (Cheney, 2011). This tension is amplified for non-heterosexual women who also experience pressure to conform to the beauty ideals of predominantly White LGB communities (Lyle, Jones & Drakes, 1999). Furthermore, social class has been shown to be important in how lesbian women engage with appearance ideals (Taylor, 2007). It is possible that white middle-class women critique the social ideals in white middle-class mainstream media, but that working-class and non-white women have a different relationship to these ideals. Therefore, exploration of this area with a more diverse group of women could produce important findings. Future research should also explore social influences

that shape body image with a larger group of bisexual women, as this group could experience unique pressures from both mainstream society and LGB communities.

In conclusion, the current research suggests that although lesbian and bisexual women critique (and may attempt to resist) mainstream thin idealisation, they can be vulnerable to body image concerns and disordered eating behaviours in much the same way as heterosexual women (Dworkin, 1988).

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>We use the term 'LGB communities' to acknowledge that such communities are not homogenous but exist in diverse social spaces, organizations and networks, providing support, social interaction, and a political voice for many different non-heterosexual women (Ellis, 2007).

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