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Using interviews to research body size: methodological and ethical considerations

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Fat studies has recently emerged as an interdisciplinary field of scholarship; it aims at challenging dominant, negative and medicalised discourses about fat bodies. Despite the growth of scholarship in this field in human geography, there has been limited discussion of the methodological and ethical issues involved in undertaking such work. This article draws on two research projects on body size – the first about expatriates in Singapore and the second about young people in the UK – in order to discuss some of the methodological and ethical considerations involved in using interviews to research the sized body.

Key words: *body size, fat studies, interviews, qualitative research, positionality, methods*

Introduction

In recent years, geographers have been increasingly drawn to researching body size through qualitative methodologies in an effort to challenge the dominance of quantitative studies that pathologise fatness as 'ugly, unhealthy and lazy' (Erdman 2011, 6). Researchers focusing on body size from a critical perspective have often – although not exclusively (Campos *et al.* 2006) – employed qualitative methodologies with the aim of moving beyond disembodied approaches (Hall 2000; Evans 2006). The popularity of qualitative research methods within the interdisciplinary field of fat studies can be understood in part due to its development in relation to feminist, queer and disability studies, which have been fundamental to progressing it as a field of scholarship and in challenging the quantification of body size in medical research (Longhurst 2005; Hopkins 2012). For geographers, fat studies has opened up the potential to explore, from a critical standpoint, how body size is socially and spatially constituted and the implications of body size and fatness within this.

Feminist scholars have played an important role in deconstructing dualistic understandings of the mind/body dichotomy (Grosz 1994; Evans 2006), which has been central to the body's 'othering' within academic thought and the justification for disembodied approaches to body size (Longhurst and Johnston 2014). Fat studies scholars

have argued against methods that seek to quantify body size (Evans 2010) because such approaches often result in homogenous understandings of body size based on race, class, sex and age (Rich and Evans 2008). Within human geography, the use of quantitative methods to study body size – such as BMI and waist-to-hip ratio – have been used to map 'obesity' and target particular populations as more 'at risk' from the 'threat' of obesity (Boero 2007). Such methods often uncritically link population statistics to demographic information targeting individuals through disciplining techniques, particularly ethnic minorities (Herrick 2008), women (Longhurst 2000) and children (Rich and Evans 2008).

In contrast, fat studies scholars have been eager to employ qualitative approaches to research on body size. Such approaches seek to capture the lived realities of body size by bringing a spatial perspective to the way body size is experienced, embodied and narrated (LeBesco 2004). Focusing on what it feels like to be a sized body, and the often ambiguous, conflicting and multiple ways that body size is felt and enacted at different times, by different people and in different places (Colls 2002 2004), rather than relying on statistical data, methods such as in-depth interviews (Hopkins 2012), auto-biography (Longhurst 2012) and accompanied shopping visits (Colls 2004 2006) have allowed researchers to bring the voices and emotions of their participants into research.

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Despite the use of qualitative methods being widespread within fat studies, there has been little written about the methodological and ethical aspects of research on body size (although see Throsby and Evans 2013). We propose that geographers could usefully begin to develop critical insights on the methodologies employed in fat studies research in order to reflect the emerging, dynamic and creative nature of the methods being employed. Through acknowledgement of the practical considerations such as the recruitment of participants, we contribute to this emerging geography of body size by reflecting on the use of in-depth interviews as a qualitative method of body size research. However, we do not suggest that interviews are the most appropriate method in which to explore experiences of embodiment. As noted by Wood *et al.* (2007), despite providing in-depth, reflective and descriptive accounts, interviews often fail to account for more immediate, material and emotional reactions. It is our aim that by reflecting on the complexities and issues of our own approach that we can start a fruitful and timely methodological discussion in the growing field of fat studies that will be of use for those seeking to engage with research about body size.

Additionally, qualitative approaches informed by fat studies may helpfully contribute to geographies of body size more broadly, including geographies of obesity, health geographies and work on obesogenic environments, much of which is uncritically grounded with the assumption that fatness is a 'problem' in need of 'solving'. While there are clear differences between such approaches to work on body size, it is our argument that sharing methodological and ethical insights into research provides a progressive opportunity for both work within fat studies and geographical work concerned with obesity to enter into a dialogue regarding critical insights into work on bodies more broadly.

For the purpose of this article we draw on the use of in-depth interviews in two research projects on body size. The first project (Lloyd) used in-depth interviews and one focus group with expatriate women in Singapore to explore experiences of body size when women move internationally (Lloyd 2013). In total 45 in-depth interviews were conducted within Singapore. The second project (Hopkins), employed 18 in-depth interviews with young people in the UK who were aged 18 to 27 and who identified as being marginalised and discriminated against because of their body size, and the mechanisms they employed to deal with this (Hopkins 2008; Hopkins 2012). Reflecting on these two projects we now focus on the methodological and ethical insights we have gleaned from using in-depth interviews as a method of research within critical studies of body size.

Recruitment and access

The methods whereby researchers gain access and recruit participants for research are understandably significant issues for the conduct of ethical research. In light of the relatively recent arrival of work within fat studies, it is unsurprising that there has been limited discussion of the complexities of gaining access to and recruiting participants. However, we would argue that these issues require careful consideration, not only in order for researchers to learn from one another, but to ensure that high ethical standards are maintained in research. Recruiting and accessing participants for body size research can be particularly difficult due to the negative connotations that being 'big' has within popular discourse (Colls 2006). It is therefore important that those researching body size carefully consider how their research is promoted to potential participants and how this influences who chooses to participate in research. The two research projects that we reflect on in this paper varied in their approach.

In Hopkins's study, potential participants were asked to consider taking part in the research as a result of 'feeling different because of their size'. The particular wording used to recruit participants was carefully thought about and in particular, given the negativity associated with 'fat', 'obese' and 'overweight' (Colls 2006), these words were deliberately avoided in the recruitment materials. Furthermore, as the study was located within fat studies, all recruitment materials specifically avoided any use of specific indicators related to body size (e.g. weight, BMI and dress size). Perhaps not surprisingly, some of those who chose to participate in the study did so because they felt overweight, fat or obese (this was the language used by the participants). However, one of the consequences of this approach to recruitment was that some of the people who participated were arguably of 'average' size (and admitted to being so) but still felt self-conscious or apprehensive about their body size and shape. This was useful because it opened up the research to participants who felt different as a result of their size but who would be excluded from medicalised studies focusing only on measurable aspects of the body such as BMI or weight. Some of those who chose to participate did so because of their height, opening up the study to others who feel concerned about their body size or shape in different ways. Concerns about height often interlinked closely with worries about weight, body size or body proportion, adding an interesting and important dimension to debates about body size that may have been missed had this particular study adopted a medicalised approach.

Alternatively, the recruitment of Lloyd's participants was not specifically focused on contacting women about their body size. Instead, this project explored several aspects of women's experiences of migration from an

embodied perspective, of which body size became a central focus. Consequently the type and depth or responses to questions regarding body size differed, with some participants discussing their experiences in great depth, with others not focusing on this at all. Lloyd found that such an approach meant that for many the discussions surrounding body size were limited or focused on issues of feeling fat. Fundamentally, such issues highlight the complex nature of researching body size but also the multiple ways that body size is experienced. Several of the participants in Lloyd's project did not find issues regarding their body size to be relevant and although the majority found migration to have contributed to negative sized experiences, only a few discussed facing physical challenges regarding their bodies and built environment. Therefore, much of the discussions surrounded feeling fatter and emotional size (although the majority did struggle with buying clothes in comparison to within their home countries). What this highlights is that there is a difference between the issues faced by those who may be considered 'normatively' sized and may *feel* fatter, and those who are physically much larger and as such must deal with a range of issues regarding their size. This does not mean that the experiences of Lloyd's project are less important or relevant, but it must be acknowledged that slenderness and 'thin privilege' enables them to gain social benefits that those whose bodies are marked as fat cannot (Donaghue and Clemitshaw 2012). As such it is important that projects acknowledge the role that fat embodiment can have to experiences in the same way that other intersections of identity do, recognising the range of size experiences but also the problems many people experience in spaces where their bodies do not fit.

Positionality and reciprocity

Throsby and Evans discuss that

whilst all fieldwork can be understood as embodied work, research in areas such as fat studies, which are focused on bodily materialities (fat), the bodies of the researcher and those researched are brought into direct (critical) interaction. (2013, 355)

Throsby and Evans (2013) suggest that traditional research frameworks fail to account for the multiple positions of researchers and researched, particularly in studies that are so intrinsically linked to both the researcher's and participant's corporeal body. Despite the incorporation of positionality and reflexivity within much feminist geographical work (Kobayashi 2003; Moss 2002), there has been less consideration of the significance that issues of positionality and reflexivity have in body size research.

The recognition that researchers adopt multiple positions throughout research, which are implicit to the ways that knowledge is situated, constructed and understood, is conventional ethical practice in much work by feminist scholars (England 1994; Hopkins 2007). Scholars can often be seen to write themselves and their identities into their work, carefully considering the potential role of their gender, race, age, sexuality and class in research encounters (Rose 1997). However, discussions surrounding the researcher's body size are rarely referred to in such reflexive accounts of the self within research, and although within fat studies, academics often recognise the presence of their own body size as important (Colls 2006), there remains a dearth of literature which critically explores the potential implications that the researcher's body size may have on the relationships between researcher and researched (for an exception see Throsby and Evans 2013). There are also problems with focusing strongly on introspective analysis. First, reflexivity has been critiqued for promoting a 'privileged and self-indulgent focus on the self' (Kobayashi 2003, 347–8), which may limit the potential to focus on the wider motivations for research (Hopkins 2007). Second, it is naive to assume that such subject positions are fixed and knowable to researchers, and that reflexivity is a 'get-out-clause' to multiple and shifting privileges (Finlay 2002).

Within our own projects, our body size – the way it was perceived by others and the way we imagined it to be perceived – were integral to the research and the ways we negotiated the research process. However, as we both found, the research context had the potential for transformative relational interactions, as we suggest in our field notes:

Lloyd J:

I was thinking today about my interviews and how I often feel that my own body is under scrutiny during them. I've started to worry about what the women I speak to think of me. On the one hand I want to be able to say that I empathise with the women, yet I am often a lot smaller than them, and because I am younger I am often more conscious of this. To some I even discuss my own person struggles with body size and how they have increased since moving to Singapore.

Hopkins P:

Quite a few participants have understandably questioned me about why I am doing this research and what my own views of my body size are. I have openly responded that this is something I have always struggled with and that I feel very self-conscious about. In a couple of interviews, I have talked about different strategies and attempts to manage my weight, including by attending Weight Watchers and losing three stones in the process (and putting some of that back on when I stopped going to the classes) and how I felt I was buying into the system by wanting to be thinner.

The extracts above demonstrate the ways that our own body size is brought into the research process and the complex and contradictory ways that we negotiated this. An important consideration here is how researchers access the social worlds of participants' experiences of body size in order to get beyond 'public' accounts of body size. As the extracts suggest, both our experiences, thoughts and corporeality are significant within the interview setting and both found it important to reveal their own, often intimate, experiences to their participants, in order to further a reciprocal research approach (Domosh 2003). However, our identities were also created in relation to the research process. As Lloyd suggests, her identity was often produced through and in relation to the research experience: 'I am often more conscious of this'. It was not always possible to 'know' what our subject positions were before the interviews because it was very often through the process of the interviews that aspects of our identities shifted and took on new meaning through embodying our interactions relationally: to the participants, the location and the time etc.

In most of the exchanges there was little to suggest that the participants felt uncomfortable discussing their experiences of body size and it is likely that this is a result of the way that the research was framed in both projects as critical geographers who are both committed to challenging the 'negative and demeaning images, representations and discourses about people who are fat' (Hopkins 2012, 1227). Most importantly we wanted our research to be informed by listening to accounts of body size, rather than making problematic medicalised assumptions about people based on their body size. We would suggest that research that critically explores body size – with participants that may be sensitive about this – should be aware of researchers' multiple and contradictory positions in relation to their own body size and that of others, and that it was not only through the focus of our research, but our own bodies and our experiences, which were important within these projects.

We would also suggest that within the West talking about body size is a practice made socially acceptable (or unacceptable) through the dominance of medical and popular discourses surrounding fatness and obesity in everyday life (Evans 2006; Evans and Colls 2009). It is through these processes that social and cultural beliefs and values about body size and 'health' have permeated everyday talk, legitimising the cultural repertoires that people use to talk about their own bodies, in ways that are easily available and normalised (Wetherell 1996). Therefore, despite the critical stance that was taken towards our research projects, much of the discussions engaged with dominant (anti)obesity discourses, through comments such as 'I know I should lose weight' (Anne¹), 'I should eat less' (Martha) and discussions of fitness regimes, slimming

practices and techniques for managing bodies in order to make them 'look smaller'. Not only do these reflect dominant understandings and ways of talking about body size and body work (Nichter 2000). They also highlight the way the researchers' bodies are part of the interview (Throsby and Evans 2013), and how they are read and responded to by participants. As Lloyd's notes suggest, she is anxious that her own 'thin privilege' may have caused the women to feel the need to express awareness that they *should* be a certain body size – regardless if they did or not. Like Throsby and Evans, we were often met with conflicting ideas regarding our reaction to participants discussing fatness as bad and a concern that 'to not speak out allows the presumption of agreement' (2013, 332). However, we would suggest that it is these complex and often contradictory understandings of body size that are important within projects of this nature. Furthermore, rather than fear the criticism of being 'a feminist scholar who critiques discourse around women and slimness while at the same time desiring to be slim and embarking on a weight loss project' (Longhurst 2012, 872), we contend that it is important to write these complex and contradictory understandings and positions into our research so that it is clear how they interrelate within research encounters and inform analysis.

In order to challenge dominant Western representations of body size there is need for more global perspectives and cross-cultural research (Cooper 2009; Besio and Marusek 2014). Within both projects we found that as white, British researchers, our perceptions of body size were very much situated within the discourses of our own cultures. However, it was through cross-cultural interactions that our traditional understandings were challenged and the scope of our projects broadened. Four of the participants in Hopkins's study belonged to ethnic minority groups who affiliated with either Islam or Sikhism and some were international students. The accounts and experiences of these participants contributed significant insights into the role of cultural background, racialised and gendered family expectations, and positioning as 'the other' in shaping experiences of, and ideas about, body size (Besio and Marusek 2014). For example, Aisha, who identified as Muslim, felt that her religion was a factor that helped her to manage her feelings about her body size. Despite having concerns about her body size, her religion acted as a positive force: 'I am a Muslim and it said that God made everyone in perfection'. On a more negative note, some participants felt under pressure about their body size as a result of cultural expectations associated with their bodies in their countries of origin. For example, Seema was an Indian international student and she felt that both her body size and height (she felt very tall) worked to reduce her femininity and make her less likely to conform to the image of a 'traditional Indian girl'.

In both studies, the use of interviewing enabled us to explore our research participants' understandings of their body size, and the different factors that influenced how they felt about their bodies, what they liked and did not like, and how they wanted to change. This provided rich insights into the complex social geographies of body size – including cross-cultural issues and factors shaped by religion and ethnicity – that would not have been possible had we adopted a medicalised or quantitative approach to the study of the body.

Emotional geographies

Attentiveness to the significance of emotions in shaping people's social worlds has become a key focus of research within social and cultural geography in the last 20 years or so (Anderson and Smith 2001; Davidson *et al.* 2005). Rather than adopting medicalised or quantitative approaches that banish or neutralise emotions from considerations of the sized body, the use of interviews can enable the researcher to establish a rapport with participants that is sensitive to the potentially moving, disturbing, touching and emotive experiences of negotiating body size. Furthermore, work that situates emotions as significant to body size (as fat studies approaches do) contributes to challenging the 'curiously unemotional' nature of the majority of work on body size (Pain 2009, 466). Uniting both work within emotional geographies and research on body size, which so far may have omitted emotions from research.

For some of our participants, the interview context provided them with a rare opportunity to discuss very personal emotions associated with their body size and arguably for many this was a cathartic experience. Furthermore, it also provided a forum for participants to discuss the specific spaces and contexts where emotions played a significant role in shaping how they felt about their body size in addition to their feelings about a range of other experiences. However, as noted above, interviews were only able to capture certain aspects of the sized experience. It is important to acknowledge that alternative methods would capture the variety of 'embodied subjectivities . . . in different spaces' (Longhurst *et al.* 2008, 208).

Within both research projects participants reflected on the positive experience of being interviewed and the opportunity to talk in detail about their sized experiences. As Zara, one of Lloyd's participants, recounted in an email after her interview:

I was thinking when you left about all these expat ladies who are so keen to chat to you. It's because you're like some form of therapy! You encourage women to say their real experiences rather than keeping up appearances they may need to maintain when meeting new people and trying to make new friends. If nothing else I find it inter-

esting to know other expat women's views – and get some relief from finding they may feel similar!

Not only did the interviews enable the participants to discuss in a supportive environment the significant emotional implications of body size, as highlighted above, but also many of the participants were encouraged to know that other people had similar experiences to them and were happy to be part of research projects that valued their opinions and experiences. Providing a space to talk about the intimate experiences of body size encouraged rich and diverse discussions. It helped to recognise the multiplicity of sized experiences, such as emotional size (Colls 2002), by offering an alternative approach to the dominance of the quantification of sized bodies which dominates much academic thought on obesity and fatness. Following Evans, it is important that 'an individual's embodied knowledge is given value and status, allowing for a more fluid understanding of bodies which can change over time and in different spaces' (2006, 265).

Conclusions

As fat studies emerges as an interdisciplinary field, it requires critical reflection of the methods being employed to research the sized body. For those engaging with body size from a critical perspective, traditional methods used to research the body – in a medicalised way – fall short of the need to understand body size experience as subjective, dynamic and spatially contingent. Although many of the methods currently being employed within fat studies research are not necessarily unique, they raise methodological and ethical issues about researching the body that have so far attracted limited academic discussion (Colls and Evans 2014).

It is our hope that this article will start a dialogue regarding the methods used to research body size and to explore geographical work on fatness and bodies. Qualitative insights from within fat studies provide a useful opportunity to engage with other work within geographies of body size (e.g. geographies of obesity). Despite clear differences with regards to the ontological and epistemological framings of research approaches to the sized body within geography, there is fruitful opportunity for crossovers, particularly through the methodological and ethical approaches to research. Namely, we believe that academic, policy and popular perspectives would be greatly enhanced through the inclusion of the voices and experiences of (fat) people. We therefore look forward to the opportunity for more critical insights into the ways that both qualitative and quantitative methodologies may enhance the already exciting and varied ways that body size is researched.

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Note

1 All names have been changed.

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