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Being Big, Becoming Small: Conversations with Māori Women about Weight Loss Surgery

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Abstract

Weight loss surgery is increasingly being used to combat obesity, resulting in recipients becoming more visible in society. This in turn facilitates the normalising of what once would have been considered a radical medical procedure and the proliferation of discourse that more often than not measures success against models of slimness and appearance and underplays the downsides of surgery. Through the use of a narrative phenomenological approach, this research explores the experiences of surgery recipients, specifically Māori women, and asks the question; 'how does the embodiment of radical change impact on relationality, interiority, conviviality, and 'being in the world'?' Through learning from Māori women, this research also explores how being Māori shapes experience both before and after surgery and in doing so, contrasts to literature which frames experiences of indigenous women through a Foucauldian lens of colonialism. I argue that, as Māori, these women are supported by the collective – significantly so – but also have to grapple with and push back negative discourses that leak into their world. I also argue that life post-surgery is entangled with both liminality and potentialities; precarious, unsettled and unsettling, while being simultaneously imbued with hope and focused towards an extending future. Surgery does transform bodies through enabling tremendous weight loss but also transfigures far more than it is designed to do.

Keywords:

Anthropology, Aotearoa, Bariatric Surgery, Becoming, Commensality, Conviviality, Eating, Food, Kai, Mana, Māori Women, New Zealand, Obesity, Phenomenology, Weight Loss Surgery

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