



Photo: www.istockphoto.com

Weighty issues in relationships

By Breeze Robertson

Psychologists have known for some time that women suffer from body weight stigmas when they are looking for a partner, but a new study by Christchurch psychologist Dr Alice Boyes shows that the prejudices continue within established relationships.

Heavier women in the study sample were less satisfied with their relationships and less confident in their relationships remaining intact.

"In a lot of ways body weight is one of the last socially acceptable stigmas," Boyes said. "Although there is a lot of variety in what people want in a mate, and though attractiveness and body is one of the things that people take into account, most men would prefer a woman in the normal weight range."

Women's body image perceptions had far-reaching consequences. "One of the findings was that heavier women expected to be judged as less warm and trustworthy — their internalised weight stigma seemed to be spilling over into this area. Perceptions of warmth and trustworthiness are the most important perceptions in a relationship."

Women's internalised weight stigmas were somewhat warranted, however, with male partners rating heavier women lower on matching their attractiveness ideals. A third reason for dissatisfaction and lack of confidence in their relationships was that heavier women tend to partner men with a lower mate value in terms of attractiveness/vitality and status/resources.

Alarmingly, only 23 per cent of female participants in the study were actually overweight (only seven women were obese). Other research has shown that men

experience body image issues, but while women almost universally want to weigh less, "men's body image insecurities were often about muscularity".

The study, co-authored with Dr Janet Latner from the University of Hawaii, was the third study based on data collected from 57 couples during Boyes' PhD at UC. All three studies have been published — in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, the *Journal of Family Psychology* and most recently in the *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy* — which Boyes credits to the quality of her training with PhD supervisor Professor Garth Fletcher (Psychology).

"I couldn't have asked for a better supervisor. He really taught me how to do world-class research and then shepherded me through that process. If you look at his PhD students, they have done outstandingly well," she said.

The latest study about body weight and intimate relationships attracted a flurry of media interest and became a hot topic in the blogosphere. Boyes was already building her media profile, writing regularly for *Mindfood* and *Fitness Life*, but she was surprised, and delighted, at the reaction.

Eagerness to share her knowledge is partly due to the time she spent at the University of Sussex where she lectured in family psychology and developmental psychology after graduating with a Postgraduate Diploma in Clinical Psychology in 2007.

"It's really emphasised in the UK that part of your role as an academic is to disseminate your research findings. When you apply for grants they really want to see that you've publicised your findings, that you have communicated them in a way that is meaningful to people."

Returning to Christchurch at the end of 2008, Boyes went online to spread the word about her new private practice and the role of the clinical psychologist.

"Psychologists are not great at marketing themselves, like everyone knows what a chartered accountant does, but people don't really know the difference between a psychologist and a counsellor or the other therapists. Part of it was I spent nine years of study to become something that few people understand, so it was to communicate what I do."

Boyes' blogs, posted on her website and emailed to subscribers, have become a resource for clients and potential clients. Spend a few moments at www.aliceboyes.com and it quickly becomes clear that she is striving to translate psychological problems, and the Cognitive Behavioural Therapy she works with, into everyday language.

Body weight and intimate relationship issues are ones Boyes sees continually at her clinic. "When people come to therapy, they usually come with three or four problems. Usually when people come it is linked to depression or an anxiety disorder; when you ask them what are the things that are problems in their lives, relationships and body image come up again and again.

"People's level of resilience is incredible. For clients therapy can be really hard work but people come and do it. People come to treatment with ways of thinking and behaving they have often had for decades and these patterns shift."