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**"Turn the lights down low"**

**Women's experiences of intimacy after childbirth**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirement for  
the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

Psychology

at Massey University, Manawatu, New Zealand

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**2016**

## **Abstract**

Women navigate many social changes when they become mothers, often including considerable changes to intimate and sexual relationships. While maternal health care attends to various physical and emotional changes for women, it has emerged that many women experience dissatisfaction in their intimate relationships after birth. A literature review revealed that while many studies had investigated the sexual experiences of women postpartum, none had looked at the effect of dominant discourses within Western popular culture. This research aimed to explore how women make sense of changes to their intimate relationships following childbirth. Norms and assumptions about the effects of childbirth on women's bodies and the implications of change to intimate relationships were examined. Six women between the ages of 25-45 who had given birth to a child in the last 10 years were interviewed in a conversational style about their experiences. A feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis was applied, attending to the dominant discourses and gendered power relations that enabled and limited positions for women. The analysis showed that normative discourse shaped not only how women experienced their bodies and intimate relationships, but every aspect of their lives including pregnancy, labour, mothering, unpaid and paid work. Furthermore, women were positioned through discourse and a gender binary as responsible for the household and childcare, as well as responsible for regulating and managing the intimate relationship. Ultimately the overriding experience of women in this research was that body changes and changes in the sexual relationship (overwhelmingly one of dissatisfaction) postpartum resulted in feelings of responsibility and guilt on the women's behalf for failing the expectations of femininity and the obligations of neoliberalism. Instances of resistance and challenge to the dominant discourses were expressed, as were alternative discourses. This research provides an understanding of the effects of dominant discourses and the power relations implicit in them on women's lived realities. This piece of research provides knowledge around contextual factors impacting on postpartum sexual health and postpartum body image. It may also provide the platform from which both professionals and women can discuss female bodies, including genitalia, and female sexuality in less 'troublesome' ways.

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost I would like to offer my sincere thanks and gratitude to the six incredible women that offered their stories, thoughts, time and energy to this project. Without your help and generosity, I would never have had the opportunity to complete this research and continue on this amazing journey of both academic discovery and personal growth. My hope is that I have honoured your experiences and maintained the respect and gratitude I have for you and your gift to me. I also hope that together we have produced an instrument that will not only provide insights and revelations to us, but will also contribute to new conversations about the postpartum body and intimacy after childbirth that are positive and empowering to all women.

Secondly I cannot express enough gratitude to my academic supervisor, Leigh Coombes. You have inspired, questioned, pushed and encouraged me throughout this process. You have offered unwavering support and faith in both this research project and in my abilities and for that I am eternally thankful. Your wisdom, knowledge and profound understanding of what I wanted to say and achieve throughout this research was always present, and I feel honoured that I had the opportunity to work with you.

To my wonderful friends and family, thank you for your encouragement, support, interest, personal insights and listening ear. An extra thank you to Emma Kelly for her incredible editing skills and also the special friends that offered to participate and helped me recruit the six amazing women of this research. Without your assistance I would not have been able to accomplish this goal.

Finally I would like to dedicate this thesis to my best friend and husband, Iain. It has been a long road and I thank you for your loving patience, hugs, words of encouragement and reassurance. To my beautiful children, I would like to thank you for your unconditional love and smiles, and hopefully to also inspire you to never give up on your goals, no matter how long they may take or how many barriers you come up against. I love you.

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