

CONFLICTING CONTEXTS

Midwives' interpretation of childbirth through
photo elicitation.

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A thesis submitted as part of the requirements for the Masters (Hons) Midwifery
degree

Faculty of Nursing, Midwifery and Health

October 2011

CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of the requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help I have received in my research work and preparation for this thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Felicity Copeland

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.

Many people have given me wonderful support and encouragement in writing this thesis.

First, I would like to acknowledge and thank my principal supervisor, Professor Caroline Homer for introducing me to the work of Mary Regan and Joan Liaschenko and suggesting I replicate their study within an Australian context. It was Caroline's enthusiasm that inspired me, and her expert guidance that has sustained me on this steep learning curve. It has been an absolute joy and privilege to be her student.

My heartfelt thanks to my secondary supervisor, Dr Hannah Dahlen, who remained committed to supporting this study despite her changing universities early in the course of my studies. Her contribution to my understanding of the research process and to the possibilities of expanding my midwifery knowledge has been invaluable. I have enjoyed her input immensely.

I would like to thank all the academic staff at UTS Faculty of Nursing, Midwifery and Health who have showed such interest and support throughout my studies. In particular the supportive and nurturing environment of the Centre for Midwifery, Child and Family Health has been an enriching experience.

My study buddies Vanessa, Lyn and Jane have been a great source of wisdom and wit, specialising in thesis crisis management strategies and I will miss our regular get-togethers. A special thank you to Jane Raymond for coming onboard at the pointy end and helping me over the line with her eagle-eye editing and wise counsel.

To Vanessa Farrar, I am enormously appreciative of your constant encouragement, your word-smith-extraordinaire skills and for being such a dear friend to me.

Amy Monk, despite having two small babies, has always managed to find the time to re-energise me and ask the right questions about my progress. Thank you for your enduring interest.

To Clancy, for traveling so far across the oceans to format for me, you are a genius!

To my three lovely sons Max, Fred and Tom, thanks for being so impressed with my word count and for letting me hog the computer for three years straight.

My deepest gratitude and love to Peter Giutronich, whose faith in me finishing this thesis has never wavered, despite having good cause. I would never have survived this process without your endless support, your generosity of spirit and the endless cups of tea.

And finally, my thanks go to the midwives in this study, for sharing their thoughts and personal insights with me so honestly and articulately. Their commitment to practising midwifery with such consciousness makes me proud to be a midwife.

This thesis is dedicated to my parents Geoff and Judy Copeland, whose love of learning and the sharing of knowledge has always inspired me.

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ABSTRACT

TITLE

Midwives' interpretations of childbirth through photo elicitation.

BACKGROUND

The increasing rates of interventions during childbirth in Australia raise serious concerns about how to keep birth normal. As midwives are the primary care givers for women during labour, it is conceivable that they have a direct influence on birth outcomes. Limited research has been undertaken regarding midwives' beliefs about childbirth and how they interpret the process of labour. This research examines the thought processes and cognitive frameworks that midwives construct around childbirth in order to understand if midwifery care is influencing the use of interventions during childbirth.

METHOD

A qualitative interpretive study was undertaken using a technique called photo elicitation. The study involved interviewing 12 midwives recruited from a variety of metropolitan maternity hospitals in Sydney, Australia. Photo elicitation is used to draw out in-depth responses from the midwives about their beliefs in relation to labour and to explore how and why they make clinical decisions. During the interview, participants were shown a photograph of a labouring woman and asked specific questions about how they would care for her. This was in the form of semi structured open-ended questions. The data were analysed using thematic analysis, which provided a flexible yet rigorous method for the interpretation and application of the themes.

FINDINGS

Six themes emerged from the data that clearly indicated midwives felt challenged by working in a system dominated by an obstetric model of care that undermined midwifery autonomy in maintaining normal birth. These themes were: Desiring Normal, Scanning the Environment, Constructing the Context, Navigating the Way, Relinquishing Desire and Reflecting on Reality. Most midwives felt they were unable to practice in the manner they were philosophically aligned with, that is, promoting normal birth, as the medical model restricted their practice. Midwives described a sense of frustration and powerlessness about having to conform to the protocols and procedures that reflected the institutionalised culture of the hospitals.

DISCUSSION

As the profession of midwifery comes from a history of marginalisation there remains a culture of subordination that inhibits the visibility and validity of midwifery philosophy. This research offers the concept of *parrhesia*, a Greek word, meaning to *speak without fear*, as a constructive and pragmatic way to challenge the dominant obstetric model. Parrhesia is suggested by Foucault as a technique to challenge unequal power relationships (Foucault 1983). This research recommends that midwives become skilled and confident in using parrhesia as an effective method to articulate their beliefs and desires for normal birth in the increasingly technological environment of childbirth.