

# Engaging with the modern birth story: everydayness absorption, and the 'idle talk' of birth

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## AIM

To describe and consider how engaging with stories of birth influenced expectations and experiences of childbirth for two generations of women.

Grew from a sense that the way we talk about and portray birth must surely be significant; having a positive or negative influence on listeners, steering them towards either medical or midwifery-led models of care.



Strength, power, capacity

Medicalisation, difficulty, risk, fear (Savage, 2001).

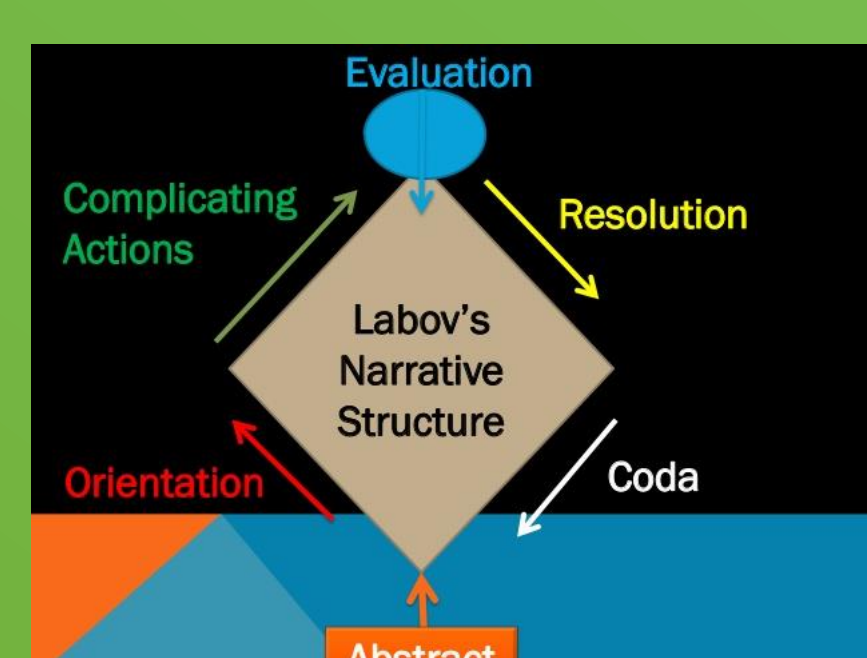


## THE MODERN BIRTH STORY

- My understanding of the concept of the birth story evolved as the study moved forward.
- At the outset I understood a birth story as an exchange between women used as a means of preparing for the birth experience (by making sense of the experience from the reflections of those who had been there already) and expressed as a 'personal, intimate, analogue thing' (Alexander, 2011).
- I came to appreciate that for women birthing in the 21st century, other sources which depicted birth, such as media images, written stories and novels, television programmes and shared spaces on internet forums, were equally valuable and could therefore be understood as part of the 'modern birth story'.



- Most stories shared followed a similar format suggesting that there is a 'narrative script' in circulation; a script which dictates how a birth story is told.
- This concurs with Soparkar's 1998 study in which she argued that the stories she heard had a chronological presentation; a beginning, middle and end involving a 'slow beginning', a 'swell of excitement', a 'dramatic climax', a 'denouement' and, finally, an 'epilogue'.



(Labov and Waletzky, 1967)

## HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGY

- A philosophical school of thought primarily informed by the philosophers Heidegger (1889-1976) and Gadamer (1900-2002).
- They postulated that positivist methods could not effectively be used to understand experiences of phenomena.
- For them understanding is not a process which can be managed and clarified by rules but rather that it is 'a very condition of being human' (Thomson, 2007).
- Hermeneutics is a way of thinking about our being, can be used to describe human understanding, and provides a means of questioning existing notions of truth, reason, and knowledge (Porter and Robinson, 2011).



## REFLEXIVITY

- All attempts at understanding in hermeneutic phenomenology start with the researcher as an active participant and involve a moving back and forth between the self, the data and the literature. The researcher takes with them a number of presumptions which govern the enquiry and potentially what can be discovered.
- To make sense of the meanings buried in the stories of the participants the primary researcher (LK) explored her presuppositions and understandings of the phenomenon.
- An interview was conducted with two members of the team and this highlighted a fundamental belief in the ability of most women to birth physiologically, a passion to foster positivity in relation to birth and a belief that birth experiences can permeate the whole of a woman's life.
- This explication allowed the researcher to be open with the 'other' (the participants); this awareness, along with that gathered through the completion of a reflexive diary and via the sharing and discussion of transcripts with members of the team, contributed to the interpretation.

## METHOD

### MPhil and PhD Phases

- MPhil Phase: 10 women who were expecting their first baby in 2013 and were registered on a 'National Childbirth Trust' (NCT) course.
- PhD Phase: 10 women who had birthed in the 1970s-1980s and were members of the 'National Federation of Women's Institutes' (NFWI) and the 'Cambridge Businesswomen's Network' (CBN).
- Data was collected via face to face and telephone interviews.
- Data was analysed according to Smythe et al., (2008).
- Ethical approval was obtained from the Science, Technology, Engineering, Medicine and Health (STEMH) Ethics Committee in April 2012 (phase one), January 2014 (phase two) and an amendment was approved in November 2014. (Project number: STEMH 005).

## TWO GENERATIONS

- Findings from an initial sample of 10 women who were pregnant in 2012 indicated that virtual media was a primary source of birth stories.
- This led to recruitment of a 2<sup>nd</sup> sample of 10 women who gave birth in the 1970s-80s, to determine whether they were more able to translate information into knowledge via stories told through personal contact and not through virtual technologies.



## 'being-in-the-world' of birth

- Pre-understandings about childbirth are rooted in women's experiences.
- During pregnancy women find themselves in a world that appears to operate in a certain way and where certain things have already shown up as important.
- Heidegger describes this as 'thrownness', explaining that Dasein (the human kind of being) is 'thrown' into its 'there' (Heidegger, 2012).
- 'Thrown' into the world of birth, women choose possibilities of action that are conditioned by their enculturation into the practices of their specific childbearing community.
- Heidegger's concept of 'das Man' alludes to the particular community into which we find ourselves thrown. It is a "primordial 'publicness' that serves as a shared basis for everyday understandings" (Bessant, 2010). In our everyday lives we do what 'one' does according to the norms laid out by the 'anyone' of which we are a member.
- Heidegger argues that we are so absorbed in the world that we do not consciously interpret or attribute meaning to anything around us (2012).
- Similarly as women are 'thrown' into a particular world of birth they also 'fall' into the dialogue and speech of that world (much of which may be 'groundless' and yet appear to be 'authoritative').
- Heidegger uses the term 'idle talk' to describe the way of speaking within our shared world.
- 'Idle talk' is: "the form of intelligibility manifest in everyday linguistic communication - average intelligibility" (Mulhall, 2013).
- Steiner (1989) refers to the phenomenon as 'vacuous high gossip' suggesting that people use this way of communicating as a 'pretence'; a means of appearing 'busy' and 'well-informed' in their everyday lives.
- In the world we accept what is claimed, simply because it is said, and we pass it on, further disseminating the claim. The result, Heidegger tells us, is that "what is said-in-the-talk as such, spreads in wider circles and takes on an authoritative character. Things are so because one says so" (2012).



"I think the problem is it's just out there, it's just out there in society. So it's a cultural thing you're battling against. I think that's a lot harder because, often, even when you're shown the facts, your culture will overwrite that. You tend to listen to that rather than the facts. I think we're all a bit guilty of that." (Bonnie)

- If women are satisfied by the 'idle talk' around them then they may not be motivated to achieve any genuine understanding of birth; rather they may just accept the public way of understanding birth.
- Heidegger suggests that curiosity goes hand in hand with 'idle talk', concerning itself with being just in order to see; curiosity is characterised by restlessness and by being distracted by new possibilities (as in the information seeking behaviours of many of the childbearing women).
- 'Idle talk' and curiosity together, rather than enabling genuine understanding may instead create ambiguity (Heidegger, 2012).

## RESULTS

### Three main themes

1. 'Stories are difficult like that', examines the birth story as problematic and considers how stories shape meaning.
2. 'It's a generational thing', considers how women from two generations came to understand what their experience might be.
3. 'Birth in the twilight of certainty', examines women's experience of Being in a system of birth as constructed, portrayed and sustained in the stories being shared.

Everydayness Absorption Idle talk permeate study



"It's all out of your hands....you're in there for hours, and everything kind of happens at once and the nurses, or whoever, take over" (Stephanie birthing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century).

In Pamela's 'world' (birthing in the 1980s) birth took place in hospital and "the attitude was just 'lie down on this bed and have your baby'". According to Pamela women complied with procedures and had very little say in what happened to them.

## CONCLUSIONS

- The stories being shared in today's world-of-birth are primarily 'horror' stories. These stories stress the inherent 'dangers' of birthing and the need for expert and interventionist care.
- The stories tell of or show birth as managed by the people and institutions around women rather than by the women themselves.
- In a world where the public way of understanding birth (the 'drama' of birth) is disseminated so widely what is extraordinary (the 'horror') is made ordinary through familiarity; the appearance of 'horror' in a story is accommodated and then made invisible by that accommodation, and other interpretations are effectively 'closed off' (Heidegger, 2012).
- The idle talk of birth is therefore a form of hidden 'authority' with the ability to dominate and oppress; making the medical model of birth the default 'setting' of birth and making women who birth outside the 'drama of birth' (or who tell a positive story of birthing) feel ostracised.
- Women are delimited by the 'idle talk' surrounding birth; coming to expect birth to be a certain way and this expectation is played out in their experience.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Professor Soo Downe  
Dr Gill Thomson  
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