



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ctcp

Women's use of complementary and alternative medicine in pregnancy: Narratives of transformation



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 24 March 2015
Accepted 6 May 2015

Keywords:
Complementary and alternative medicine
Pregnancy
Holism
Narrative

ABSTRACT

Background: Pregnancy and childbirth constitute a time of transition in women's lives. Many women turn to complementary and alternative medicines (CAM) during pregnancy. However, little is known about women's experiences of CAM in relation to their pregnancy and childbirth journey.

Methods: a narrative study aimed to gain insight into the experiences of women who use CAM in pregnancy and to explore the contribution CAM made to their pregnancy and childbirth journey. Interviews were conducted with 14 women who had used a range of CAMs during pregnancy and birth. Data analysis focussed on the meaning and significance of CAM use in pregnancy and a number of core themes emerged.

Results: This paper presents some findings from this research which reveals a narrative genre that can be defined as transformational. CAM has a positive transformational effect on women's experience of pregnancy and childbirth.

Conclusion: Women's narratives illustrate the positive impact of CAM on the subjective experiences of pregnancy and childbirth.

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1. Introduction

Pregnancy and childbirth constitute a time of transition in women's lives. Many women describe their experience as one of 'an emotional rollercoaster' reporting mixed feelings of happiness, excitement, anxiousness and vulnerability (DH 2011).

In the UK recent reports highlight many women receive poor quality maternity care as there is little time available to support women with their individual experiences of pregnancy or to provide emotional support. [1,2].

In addition, studies report that many women turn to complementary and alternative medicines (CAM) during pregnancy [3–6]. CAM is defined as 'diverse health care systems, practices, and products that are not generally considered part of conventional medicine' [7]. However, much of the research is limited to exploring the prevalence of CAM use and as such does little to deepen knowledge and understanding of women's experiences of CAM use in relation to their pregnancy and childbirth journey. Qualitative studies which seek to gain insights on women's experiences of CAM suggest women seek CAM to prepare themselves for labour and

increase their chance of having a normal birth, to aid relaxation and to retain control over health decisions [8,9], but in-depth understanding of the meaning of CAM use is neglected.

This paper presents some findings from recent empirical qualitative research that explored women's motivations and experiences of CAM use in pregnancy. The focus of this paper is to present some findings which reveal that CAM use has a positive transformational effect on women's experience of pregnancy and childbirth.

2. Methods

Narrative inquiry is an approach within qualitative research which involves the collection of narratives [10]. Narrative researchers such as Mishler and Frank suggest the significance of stories lies in their ability to reveal human emotions and experiences. [11,12] Czarniawska suggests the underlying premise of narrative inquiry is the belief that individuals make sense of their world most effectively by telling stories [13]. Experiences, thoughts and feelings come to consciousness through the telling of stories. Individual's personal stories are always influenced and constrained by wider societal discourses [14]. Thus, Riessman argues that the strength of narrative research lies in its ability to reveal different

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levels of meaning, often contradictory in a way in which the individual and society can be better understood [15].

Sample: 14 women aged between 26 and 46 living in the SouthWest of England participated in the study. Participants used at least one CAM modality in a past pregnancy. All women were educated to tertiary level and all self-funded their use of CAM. CAM use was extensive with participants reporting the use of 21 different CAM modalities.

3. Data collection methods

Face to face interviews were carried out on 2 or 3 occasions. The narrative approach to interviews was one which encouraged participants to tell their stories of pregnancy, birth and CAM use in a way that was meaningful and appropriate for them. During the first interview the focus of the story telling was on how participants came to use CAM both before and during pregnancy. The second or third interview served as an opportunity for women to either continue telling their story or as an opportunity to question and seek clarification. Most interviews lasted about 1.5–3 h.

4. Data analysis

Interview data were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts of the interviews were shared with participants and research supervisors to ensure trustworthiness of data recording and interpretation. One phase of analysis concentrated on identifying the genre of the narrative. The concept of genre is defined as a pattern of narrative and imagery that forms a recognizable and conventional story line [16]. It is argued that analysing the genre of a narrative can provide insights into the meaning of events [10]; Lieblich et al. [17] suggest that all narratives can be classified as of a 'progressive, regressive or static' genre. The concept particularly of a progressive genre could be readily applied to the participant's narratives of CAM use in this study. However, I argue that a more apt description would be of a 'transformative' genre: one which displays the potential of CAM to facilitate changed perspectives, a transformation of ideas or a ways of being in the world, a transformation of experiences to positive life events. The findings which focus on the theme of transformation are presented and discussed.

5. Ethics

Permission to undertake the study was granted by the University Ethics Committee. A leaflet outlining the study was provided and a consent form was signed by participants at the outset but also at each interview consent was rechecked. Participants were informed they could opt out of the research at any time. To protect anonymity participants chose their own pseudonym. Support services were available through a 'Birth Reflection' service if required by participants.

6. Findings

6.1. Narrative disruption, pregnancy and CAM

Pregnancy for all the participants signalled a period of transition and although in a positive sense, a life disrupted. The concept of narrative disruption was evident in all participants' stories. Erin had not planned her pregnancy and faced difficulty coming to terms with her feelings around this and her ensuring troubled relations with her partner. She reports early pregnancy as *'a really difficult time'*.

Even when pregnancy is planned, events may not unfold as anticipated. Alexandra also struggled to deal with her feelings

during pregnancy.

'I didn't think it (pregnancy) would be such a hormonal upheaval. It's just ... your resources are gone, you feel so exhausted with it. I really didn't expect that. I needed help,

A number of other participants talked about the unexpected impact of pregnancy on their emotions and shared their feelings of anxiety and vulnerability. Even for a second time mother, Riley describes *'my hormones were all over the place, making me feel really vulnerable and emotional'*. Clarissa explains the origins of her vulnerability:

'now I feel somehow more vulnerable than ever before, about life and your whole existence and its just ... all of a sudden, it wasn't just about me, it was about somebody else and you have to think about somebody else and what that means....yeh definitely nerve racking'. (Clarissa)

These feelings of vulnerability could also be viewed as narrative disruption described by Becker [18] as a 'period of life reorganisation'. This generates anxiety and stress and calls for a reevaluation of life as it is currently experienced, an apt description for participants in this study. Thus the imperative for participants in their actions was to fend off feelings of vulnerability and anxiety. They often cited a reluctance to discuss their worries or concerns with professionals providing maternity care:

'The midwives they were often running late when it was my turn they are like, the blood pressure is OK, no sugar in your urine, right OK, is there anything else and you know they just want to hear no or fine and then you are out again. There were often times when I just wanted to talk to someone but never felt when I could because there was just so much time pressure on them'. (Alexandra)

Participants' desire for the holistic, more personal orientated approach of CAM led them to choose this option in seeking health and wellbeing. Erin the first of her peer group to become pregnant talked about the need to *'surround herself with other women'* who could support her through the process of pregnancy and childbirth, she chose hypnobirthing, healing and massage from female therapists. Star felt she *'needed someone to guide her, someone who knew about pregnancy and birth'*. She sought this through attending a hypnobirthing class. These narratives provide evidence of narrative disruption. Engagement with CAM enabled participants to deal with their feelings during this time and achieve emotional equilibrium. Once participants engaged with their chosen CAM modality their narratives revealed a transformation in their experiences and perceptions.

7. A transformational genre: 'life dramatically and fundamentally changed' (Riley)

Erin reported the healing therapy she and her partner engaged in as *'transformative'*. Riley's also commented that in receiving acupuncture *'life dramatically and fundamentally changed'* illustrating her belief in the transformational impact of CAM. The transformative genre was also evident in other participant's narratives in a number of ways. In the subsequent section I attempt to show how this transformation was mediated.

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