



The joy at birth: An interpretive hermeneutic literature review

Susan Crowther, MSc, BSc, (Hons), RM, RN, PhD Candidate (Senior Lecturer in Midwifery and Caseload Midwife)^{a,*}, Elizabeth Smythe, PhD, RN, RM (Professor)^b,
Dr Deb Spence, PhD, RN, RM (Senior Lecturer)^b

^a AUT University, Auckland, New Zealand

^b School of Health Care Practice, AUT University, Auckland, New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: this literature review examines the experience of joy at birth and what that joy means. The premise is that the whole of the birthing experience has not been fully explicated in the literature and that something of significance remains unexplored and unspoken. It is argued that a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to reviewing literature provides unique insights and leads to deeper understandings about birth and the experience of joy that attunes at that moment.

Methodology: the philosophical underpinnings informed by Heidegger and Gadamer are central to this review and therefore the process of reviewing literature hermeneutically is described. Heideggerian phenomenology is used as the method to ask the questions of the literature in order that concealed and hidden experiences of joy at birth are made visible where they are gleaned from the literature. A hermeneutic lens is used to uncover relationships within the phenomenon of joy at birth and meaning.

Findings: although a vast birth literature was reviewed joy at birth was often ignored, hidden or covered over. Reviewing the literature on relationships, professional presence, place of birth, birth satisfaction studies and birth as peak and spiritual experience provides glimpses of the phenomenon 'joy at birth'.
Conclusion: it is argued that joy at birth remains largely neglected as a phenomenon worthy of consideration. Plausible interpretations are presented that suggest that joy at birth points to something significant and meaningful. Spiritual and sacred meaning is alluded to in the papers reviewed yet the majority of papers that investigate birth leave this meaning unspoken. The review highlights a need for further thinking and questioning about birth that would direct on-going investigation.

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* Correspondence at: AUT University, Department of Midwifery, School Health Care Practice, Faculty of Health and Environmental Studies PB 92006, Auckland, New Zealand.

E-mail address: scrowthe@aut.ac.nz (S. Crowther).

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Introduction

Something special attunes at birth that makes the occasion different from other daily experiences. Birth experiences are culturally determined, enmeshed in the context and culture of society (Selin and Stone, 2009; Clarke, 2012; McIntosh, 2012). Thus birth can be viewed as social metaphor reflecting interpretation according to the dominant social context (Crouch and Manderson, 1993). At times this has become confrontational rhetoric. Odent (2002) argued that the industrialisation of society mirrors the industrialisation of human birth; a story of controlling and disturbing. He contends that modern maternity practices serve to disrupt the physiological processes of birth denuding its innate power. Yet, there is danger inherent in a one dimensional way of interpreting birth. It is important to remember that the prevalent western technocratic medical model of birth is only one birth culture amongst many in a vast historical and evolving cultural context. This is not to argue that modern westernised birth approaches are deficient but it raises the question of whether significant aspects (dimensions) of birth are being hidden in the medicalised environment.

Birth arouses the imagination and provides a sense of mystery that speaks to us all (Forbes-Rogers, 1966). The unique mood or attunement at birth alludes to something important and perhaps mysterious. Yet the frequently experienced sudden joy at birth is relegated in the scientific birth literature to an occasional passing comment thus silencing the phenomenon. Joy is a word that conjures many unique interpretations: great delight or happiness caused by something exceptionally good or satisfying; it can be a keen pleasure; elation, delight, something greatly valued or appreciated, an expression or display of glad feeling, a state of happiness, felicity and cherished contentment (Parse, 1997; Harrison, 2010). One can feel joy; be glad and rejoice. Joy appears to be a cross cultural phenomenon (Maslow, 1964).

This hermeneutic literature review seeks to attune thinking and dialogue to the phenomenon named 'joy at birth'. In order to attune to this way of reviewing literature examination of methodological notions is essential.

Methodology of review

Hermeneutic phenomenological research is suited to childbirth due to its focus on context, lived-experience and surfacing of meaning from such experiences (Thomson et al., 2011; Miles et al., in press). Hermeneutic scholarship requires an interpretive lens and way of attuning that invokes both creative and scientific thinking. This review provides alternative findings and conclusions that challenge readers to think beyond more conventional approaches to literature reviews. Smythe and Spence (2012) argued that 'Engaging hermeneutically with literature is distinctive' (p. 23) and different from quantitative and other qualitative reviews. In a hermeneutic review 'there are few rules to follow; rather a way to be attuned' (Smythe and Spence, 2012, p. 23). The philosophical underpinnings attune thinking. Interpretive

hermeneutic literature reviewing is not about predicting or providing final definitions through pooling, assembling, summarising findings and critiquing the analyses. Neither is the intention to focus on developing defined themes that lead to a theory. It is more about how one is attuned philosophically as one engages with the literature. Hermeneutic and phenomenological philosophical notions from the works of Heidegger and Gadamer were thus pivotal to this review.

Reviewing as questioning

To review hermeneutically is to question, remaining engaged and open to what could be revealed; 'The essence of the question is to open up possibilities and keep them open' (Gadamer, 1960/1975, p. 298). Questions and answers became a dialectical play. Thus, the literature was questioned: what is silenced regarding the mood at birth? What is concealed and unsaid about the joy at birth? How is the joy at birth announced? How is this joy meaningful? Attuning questioning in this way deepened understanding, clarified and sharpened our focus.

There is a lot written about birth but little of the joy or the something 'special' at birth itself. Reviewing the literature presented the paradox of having so much to read yet only being rewarded with occasional glimpses and rare 'that is it' moments. Background taken-for-granted aspects of the phenomenon revealed hidden unspoken meanings within and between words. Searching for the phenomenon of joy at birth in the literature was challenging and required a 'willingness to be surprised' (Smythe and Spence, 2012).

Heidegger's phenomenology

The meaning of a phenomenon is essentially withdrawn and hidden, forgotten, covered up, and even disguised. It lies hidden in the background familiarity of experiences. Thus phenomena remain unintelligible to us in this form. A phenomenon can, however, be partially revealed and made explicit through sustained reflection and questioning. A pre-reflective background can be brought to light and languaged through the process of phenomenological interpretation. Phenomenology is thus a method for uncovering phenomena through a particular approach. Interplay of the Heideggerian notions of withdrawal, appearance, announcement and semblance were integral to the process of this review (Heidegger, 1927/1962).

In *withdrawal* the phenomenon plays hide and seek; at times silenced and leaping out when least expected. In some articles rich descriptions were provided about the lived experience of being at birth that spoke of the shedding of 'tears' at the birth of an infant. Yet tears are an *appearance* of joy, not the joy itself.

Appearances can conceal the heart of phenomena while revealing something else on their surface. The tears revealed the phenomenon as 'appearance' which is as close to the thing in itself as is possible.

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