



## ORIGINAL RESEARCH – QUANTITATIVE

# “Relinquish the reins”: Persuasion and consensus in the discourse of pregnancy and childbirth advice literature



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Popular pregnancy and childbirth advice books constitute an important source of information for pregnant women. These texts shape women's perceptions of pregnancy, childbirth and the medical care they will receive during this time.

**Aims:** This article reports on a study of the enactment of power relations between pregnant women and their medical caregivers in the discourse of pregnancy and childbirth advice literature and its implications for practice.

**Methods:** The study focuses on the discursive positioning of women in relation to medical personnel through a critical discourse analysis of two popular advice books, one in English and one in French.

**Findings:** The article suggests that through the use of a number of key discursive strategies, pregnant women are constructed as under the control of the medical institution in these texts. However, this control is not achieved by an overt oppressive discourse, instead it is achieved through persuasion and consensus by generating the consent of pregnant women to comply with medical norms.

**Conclusions:** The medical institution is represented in these texts as a dominant force while women are constructed as powerless recipients of medical care. Medical professionals should firstly consider whether the power relations represented in these texts correspond to those enacted in clinics and delivery rooms. Secondly, caregivers should be cautious about recommending popular pregnancy and childbirth advice books to women as the relationship between pregnant women and their caregivers may be undermined by the negative power asymmetry enacted in these texts.

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## 1. Introduction

In today's Western world, all countries provide comprehensive antenatal care, assisted births and postnatal care. Yet, pregnancy and childbirth in the 21st century are characterised by conflicts and contradictions. Medical advances have purported to make pregnancy and childbirth safer than ever before and the medical model of childbirth has very much become the norm.<sup>4</sup> The medical model is a model which 'defines pregnancy and childbirth as potentially pathological situations. As such, these biological processes are believed to require active medical management (...) in the normal course of labour and delivery and a readiness for medical intervention should any problems arise'.<sup>32(p38)</sup> However, various interest groups including feminist

movements, women's health movements and home-birth campaigners have vigorously campaigned for a return to a natural model of pregnancy and childbirth.<sup>22</sup> It can be argued that as a result of these ideological conflicts, women have a large number of choices with regard to childbirth.<sup>26</sup> They can decide where to have the baby (at home, in hospital, at a birth centre) and how (naturally, with medication or caesarean). In many countries, they may also make decisions about who their lead caregiver may be (a private obstetrician, a public hospital doctor, an independent midwife). However, Edwards describes the availability of such choices as largely constrained by social factors that 'the intersection between ideology and resources results in a predetermined, medically oriented menu over which women have limited control to define or change'.<sup>4(pp2–3)</sup> The discourses of pregnancy and childbirth of the late 20th century and early 21st century shaped by these socio-cultural factors are complex and reflect the ideological conflicts between medical and natural models of pregnancy and childbirth.

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Few formal studies of pregnancy and childbirth advice literature have been published. Those that do exist have examined the discourse of texts addressed to pregnant women (advice books, antenatal booklets and handouts) from a variety of perspectives including psychology, feminist studies, sociology and linguistics. These studies have revealed the existence of discordant belief systems within these texts, ranging from a medical/scientific view of pregnancy and childbirth to a perception of pregnancy and birth as natural events.<sup>9,12,20,21,25,28,35</sup> These findings confirm that the discourse of these texts is reflecting the ideological conflicts surrounding the social practices of pregnancy and childbirth and also affirm that ‘choices’ with regard to antenatal care and childbirth are socially constrained. Pincus highlights that while many pregnancy advice books purport to encourage women to make informed choices with regard to pregnancy and childbirth, they effectively ‘send their readers directly into the arms of the obstetric establishment’.<sup>20(p210)</sup>

However it must be remembered that advice books are also part of a wider discourse of pregnancy and childbirth, the dominant discourse of which is arguably medical discourse.<sup>15,17–19,21</sup> Rothman argues that having a baby in the twenty first century has become ‘part of the high-tech medical world’ where ‘pregnant women become workers in an unskilled assembly line, conceptualised as machines, containers holding precious, genetic material’.<sup>23(pp391,395)</sup> However, counter-discourses which challenge the dominant medical discourse also exist in this area. O’Reilly emphasises that alternative movements such as feminism, midwifery and the natural childbirth movement have ‘challenged the official definition/dominant ideology of childbirth as a medical procedure through contesting definitions, alternative mythologies of birth as a “natural” process’.<sup>19(p33)</sup> The above-mentioned studies of pregnancy and childbirth advice books have affirmed that pregnancy, childbirth and women are represented in different and often contradictory ways in these texts. It is not surprising that women feel ‘disempowered’,<sup>17(p22)</sup> ‘fragmented’<sup>15(p194)</sup> and ‘trapped’<sup>29(p128)</sup> by the confusing and contradictory representations of pregnancy and childbirth in this literature.

Therefore while the presence of discordant discourses of pregnancy as a medical event and as a natural process in discourses of pregnancy and childbirth has been firmly established in research, and although it is evident that the medical view of pregnancy and childbirth tends to dominate discourse in this area, no study has addressed *how* this dominance is achieved in the discourse of pregnancy and childbirth advice books. Precisely how is the medical model asserted as the primary discourse of pregnancy and childbirth? *How* in Pincus’ words do these books ‘send their readers directly into the arms of the obstetric establishment’<sup>20(p210)</sup> and what are the implications for practitioners and caregivers?

To answer this question the powerful role of literature in the construction of women’s experiences and perceptions of pregnancy and childbirth must first of all be considered. The critical discourse analysis approach applied to the analysis of the texts which form the basis of this study must also be explained before identifying the discursive strategies used in these texts to assert the power of the medical establishment.

## 2. Pregnancy and childbirth advice literature

In contemporary western society pregnant women receive information and advice from a large and varied combination of sources including antenatal classes, books, magazines and the Internet.<sup>27</sup> However popular pregnancy and childbirth advice books represent an important source of information for pregnant women. Powell Kennedy et al. emphasise that books represent the most important source of information for pregnant women in the

US with 33% of women obtaining information about pregnancy and birth through books, followed by friends and relatives (19%), the Internet (16%) and doctors (14%).<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, pregnancy and childbirth advice literature represents a relatively recent phenomenon dating predominantly from the late eighteenth century on. Early literature includes works such as Dr. Grigg’s *Advice to the Female Sex in General, Particularly those in a State of Pregnancy and Lying-in* (1789), Thomas Bull’s *Hints to Mothers for the Management of Health During the Period of Pregnancy and in the Lying-in Room* (1837) and in French D’Ammon’s *Le Livre d’or de la jeune femme* (1891) has many references to pregnancy. The volume of pregnancy and childbirth advice literature published for women has dramatically grown in volume over the last two centuries. When the word ‘pregnancy’ is typed into the search engine of the popular amazon.com website for purchasing books online, it indicates, on 3 June 2014, 69,106 hits. Titles in the series listed range from general pregnancy advice books to more specific areas of interest in the domain of pregnancy such as nutrition, psychological and physical well-being. Other titles provide information on exercise, fitness, massage, pilates, meditation, aromatherapy and yoga. There are also pregnancy books for runners, lesbians, vegetarians, women expecting multiple births, teenagers, women with disabilities, working women and older mothers. The sheer volume of advice literature available suggests that these books are widely read in contemporary society.

This increasing publication and consumption of lifestyle, self-help books and advice literature is attributed by some to the fact that the need for people to construct their own identities has been heightened in late modern societies. This is due to changes in social structures which mean that people no longer have a traditional order to rely on.<sup>10</sup> To these theorists, social consciousness has become ‘externalised’ in late modern societies and people have to turn to ‘specialised systems and experts who organise them for information, know-how [...] which they need in order to handle even the most personal and intimate aspects of their being’.<sup>2(p44)</sup> People are thus increasingly dependant on experts to help them to negotiate rites of passage. Pregnancy and motherhood have also begun to be portrayed as highly skilled professional tasks necessitating advice from experts:

[W]omen are expected to ensure that they are healthy and ‘ready’ for motherhood, that their children are planned rather than conceived accidentally and are born into a nuclear family with both a mother and a father. Mothers are expected to learn about pregnancy and childbirth and to attend antenatal classes so they are initiated by the medical ‘experts’ into the necessary rites and knowledge.<sup>34(p43)</sup>

The increasing reliance on self-help literature, the ‘professionalization’ of pregnancy and motherhood and the capacity of these texts to ‘shape’ women’s experience of pregnancy and motherhood mean that pregnancy and childbirth advice books have the potential to exert a powerful influence on their readers.

## 3. The data

This study is based on two contemporary pregnancy advice books: Murkoff and Mazel’s *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*,<sup>16</sup> and Ciraru-Vigneron and Kosmadis’ *La Bible de votre grossesse*.<sup>3</sup> These books are written largely for a general audience of pregnant women but are either written by or informed by health professionals and thus interdiscursively draw on both popular and expert literature. The above-mentioned texts were initially chosen because I had encountered them as an expectant mother myself. A French text was chosen to ensure the findings of this study were not limited solely to texts available in the English-speaking western world. I conducted a

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