



## Mood and birth experience

Susan Crowther\*, Liz Smythe, Deb Spence

AUT University, Auckland, New Zealand

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Those at the birth of a baby sometimes speak of the experience as significant and meaningful; an experience in which there is an atmosphere or mood that surrounds the occasion. This paper explores this mood, its recognition, disclosure and how we attune or not to it. The paper is philosophically underpinned by hermeneutic phenomenology. The Heideggerian notion of “attunement to mood” is used to interpret this phenomenon. This paper describes *how such a mood becomes visible*. **Methods:** Using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, 14 tape-recorded transcribed interviews, each about an hour long, were conducted over 8 months from mothers, birth partners, midwives and obstetricians. The stories crafted from these transcripts have been interpreted alongside my own preunderstandings and related literature. Appropriate ethical approval was gained. **Findings:** Analysis suggests that there is a positively construed mood of joy at birth that can be concealed when disrupted. Disturbing this mood has the effect of exposing the world of birth and its inherent activities and feelings revealing possible meanings inherent in the lived birth experiences. Disturbances at birth provide distinctions and tensions in which a concealed constitutive mood at birth can be seen. This paper provides insight towards a deeper appreciation into how the sacred joy of birth may be protected. **Implications for practice:** The way in which we attune to birth may have consequences to birth outcomes and to the experience of childbirth. The consequences of these findings for those in the world of birth are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

To be touched and affected by the mood at birth has intrigued and invoked passion by many. Birth arouses the imagination, a mystery that all of us have been involved. This paper explores the phenomenon of mood at birth. Using the Heideggerian notion ‘attuning to mood’<sup>1</sup> the lived experience of joy by those present at birth is explored. There are midwifery concerns that the essential meaning of birth is overshadowed by some contemporary birthing practices.<sup>2–5</sup> Stories of disturbance of mood have been interpreted making visible that which is often unsaid, highlighting distinctions and tensions revealing the possibilities of absence and presence. In such a way, the nature of this constitutive mood at birth is shown in both its vulnerability and strength.

## 2. Literature review

The International Confederation of Midwives (ICM)<sup>6</sup> has a statement of belief in which birth is held to be a profound

experience with significant meaning for women and their families. It appears that birthing practices have become increasingly secular and clinical, particularly within the western medical reductionist paradigm that largely informs maternity care, mention of any ‘mood of joy’ at birth is conspicuously absent in daily maternity practice. Researchers have attempted to unravel the implications for babies, women and their families and communities, enquiring into benevolent women-centred holistic practices that facilitate gentler, physiological and empowering care.<sup>7</sup> However women’s ability to birth naturally and physiologically is now being questioned and this is accompanied by the fear that something of experiential significance is being lost.<sup>8,9</sup> Contemporary birth technologies appear to be creating a framework which is self-perpetuating, obscuring the mystery of what birth ‘is’ by reducing it to things that are visible and measurable. It appears that in the early 21st century reproductive technologies are defining the birthing experience.<sup>10</sup> A brief exploration of consumer websites reveals the fear and anxiety surrounding birth in relation to the increasing intervention rates. Yet Thomson found that the original birth experience is still enacted and experienced in the context of technological modern childbirth. Even in high interventionist births stories of joy and elation are told.<sup>11</sup> Concerns that technology and modern maternity care can disturb and hide the

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +64 021 229 4858.  
E-mail address: [scrowthe@aut.ac.nz](mailto:scrowthe@aut.ac.nz) (S. Crowther).

mood at birth may be inferred although there is no literature specifically examining this notion. It is the mood of joy at birth that is central to this enquiry: “*How does such a mood become visible?*” This phenomenological study highlights awareness of our understandings of 21st century western childbirth and the tensions between technocratic and natural childbirth practices by returning to the phenomenon of mood experienced at birth. What is essentially an interpretive philosophical question has practical implications for revisiting contemporary childbirth practices and questioning the way we focus ongoing investigations.

### 3. Method

A literature review was undertaken in order to justify the absence of research informing this phenomenon.<sup>12</sup> Following ethical approval from AUT University Ethics Committee, data collection involved 14 unstructured hour long interviews with 4 mothers, 3 birth partners, 4 midwives and 3 obstetricians. Participants were purposefully selected through word of mouth and snow-ball technique. All participants were from the Auckland and Northland regions of New Zealand. They represented a variety of practice areas and population who had experience and a specific interest in the topic of this study. The number of participants chosen was an ongoing deliberation as interviews and beginning level analysis evolved. A constant tension was felt, “*is there enough or is there not enough data? What voices remain silent?*” There was a sense of sufficiency in terms of variation of meaning; a moment when there was enough essential gathered meaning that revealed as many aspects of the phenomenon as possible. I stopped data collection once there was a sense of knowing that enough data had been gathered “a state of ‘knowing’ that one more interview will be too many” (p. 41).<sup>13</sup> In phenomenological research it is not possible to become saturated but reach a place when adequate convincing interpretations are comprehensive, explicit and visible. At this point more interviews and their resultant narratives became seemingly redundant. This method is not dependent on demographic diversity; the purpose was not to compare difference but rather to invite other’s voices to the merging conversations. This required vigilance throughout not to privilege the voices and interpretations of particular perspectives but to stay orientated towards revealing the mood at birth. The interviews were transcribed and crafted into stories of lived-experience.<sup>14</sup> Revealing and interpreting what lies concealed in experience is what distinguishes the Heideggerian style of phenomenology.<sup>1</sup> Initial interpretations suggest the presence of attunement hidden in the background at birth. Using Heideggerian<sup>1,15</sup> and Gadamerian<sup>16,17</sup> philosophical underpinnings these stories reveal a mood of joy at birth.

As the researcher interpreting the texts, I declare from the outset that my preconceived understandings contribute to the conditions of emerging interpretation. Human beings are unable to understand the phenomenon of birth mood without bringing themselves into its interpretations. Included in this process was and is the context of my own life as identified in a pre-understandings interview at the start of this study. As a midwife of 20 years in a variety of settings both in the western context and developing countries I pay attention to my own pre-understandings, judgements and those of others.<sup>18</sup> My pre-understandings, including my own feelings always overshadow judgements of the situational reality of birth. Who I am and how I respond to the phenomenon is thus part of the interpretation and cannot be bracketed and placed outside the process of interpretive work.<sup>16</sup> A detailed audit trail of the research process was collected<sup>19–21</sup>: research field notes, email communications as well as recorded discussions with my supervisors.

I remain cognizant that any conclusions are interpretations on-the-way and that there is a need to be explicit about how interpretations are reached in order to provide evidence of trustworthiness of the method.<sup>19,21</sup>

### 4. Analysis

The world of birth is one of always already shared meanings. The purpose of hermeneutic analysis is to uncover such meanings. This involved an iterative process of moving constantly between the details of specific data and the whole data set. A dialectical play involved writing and re-writing, mind maps, concurrent literature reviewing and discussions with supervisors and colleagues facilitating plausible interpretations. Themes emerged, changed, got named and renamed. Sometimes themes split or combined as interpretation deepened. Analysis was always dynamic opening up possibilities of meanings that original questioning obscured. This demanded engaged openness as the circular process of this method developed concurrently with each interview. I remained vigilant that emerging insights across and within each transcript never lost their contextual uniqueness.

### 5. Philosophical terms: attunement and thrownness

According to Heidegger it is human to be always already in attunement; attuned in one way or another to one or other mood.<sup>1</sup> A mood frames how we are doing and opens the world up to us in different ways. For example, if one is in a gloomy mood, the world is disclosed to us in a gloomy way. Similarly, in a mood of joy the world is understood and interpreted differently opening up other possibilities. Heidegger argues that attunement is not a purely subjective experience but a shared communication.<sup>1</sup> The use of language infers this shared notion of mood as in the English phrase ‘being in a mood’ as opposed to ‘a mood being in us’.<sup>22</sup> Put another way, the moods of being with others at a party can find us in a mood collectively. Other examples include the mood of our times, the mood of the labour ward or the mood of birth. Mood is in the background revealing the fore-grounded world to us; just as light in the unseen background reveals a room. Mood in the Heideggerian context is not to be confused with emotional and psychological constructs. To use another analogy, an ontological attunement can be likened to a fever that cannot be seen. It is the sweating and hot skin that is visible and measurable, a propos, the surface emotional states. The source of the visible symptoms remains hidden. The basis of fleeting emotional and psychological states at birth is a pre-reflexive ontologically attunement disclosing our understanding of birth. The world of birth without such attunement would be unintelligible to us. Bringing attunement at birth to reflective self-awareness is the purpose of this paper.

Personal experience as a midwife suggests that there is something significant, special or sacred about the mood at birth that is experienced at an ontological level. It is ontological in that it informs and gathers together who we are in those moments, telling us how we are faring. It might be made visible by the standing up of hair on the back of one’s neck as the birth unfolds signalling something of significance. It could be the first meeting of a baby with its mother and partner and the shedding of joyful tears as we become overwhelmingly attuned and assailed by something of extraordinary power.

We find ourselves literally thrown into birth and the mood that assails it. Drawing on the Heideggerian notion of attunement<sup>1</sup>, this paper examines disturbance to the attunement at birth; being attuned to a mood ‘that assails us’, means experiencing being “*thrown into situations*” (p.75). Thrownness is key to the understanding of attunement. Our thrownness is revealed to us

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