



Sustainability and resilience in midwifery: A discussion paper



Susan Crowther, PhD, MSc, BSc, (Hons), RM, RN (Professor of Midwifery)^{a,*},
 Billie Hunter, PhD, BNurs, RM (RCM Professor of Midwifery)^b,
 Judith McAra-Couper, PhD, BA, RM, RGON (Associate Professor, Head of Midwifery
 Department)^c, Lucie Warren, PhD, BMid (Hons), RM, RCBC Research
 (Fellow / Midwifery Lecturer Chair)^d, Andrea Gilkison, PhD, MEd (Dist),
 BA (Soc Sci), RM, RCompN (Associate Head Postgraduate)^c,
 Marion Hunter, DHSc candidate, MA (Hons), BA, ADN, RM, RGON (Senior Lecturer)^c,
 Anna Fielder, MPhil, DPSM, PGDip, BA(Hons) (Research Officer)^e,
 Mavis Kirkham, PhD, MA, BA, RM (Emeritus Professor of Midwifery)^f

^a Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, Scotland, UK

^b School of Healthcare Sciences, College of Biomedical and Life Sciences, Cardiff University, United Kingdom

^c Midwifery Department, Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand

^d All Wales Midwifery and Reproductive Health Research Forum, Maternal and Child Health School of Healthcare Sciences, United Kingdom

^e Centre for Midwifery and Women's Health Research, Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand

^f Sheffield Hallam University, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Background: midwifery workforce issues are of international concern. Sustainable midwifery practice, and how resilience is a required quality for midwives, have begun to be researched. How these concepts are helpful to midwifery continues to be debated. It is important that such debates are framed so they can be empowering for midwives. Care is required not to conceptually label matters concerning the midwifery workforce without judicious scrutiny and diligence.

Aim: the aim of this discussion paper is to explore the concepts of sustainability and resilience now being suggested in midwifery workforce literature. Whether sustainability and resilience are concepts useful in midwifery workforce development is questioned.

Method: using published primary midwifery research from United Kingdom and New Zealand the concepts of sustainability and resilience are compared, contrasted and explored.

Findings: there are obvious differences in models of midwifery care in the United Kingdom and New Zealand. Despite these differences, the concepts of resilience and sustainability emerge as overlapping themes from the respective studies' findings. Comparison between studies provides evidence of what is crucial in sustaining healthy resilient midwifery practice. Four common themes have been identified that traverse the different models of care; Self-determination, ability to self-care, cultivation of relationships both professionally and with women/families, and a passion, joy and love for midwifery.

Conclusions: the impact that midwifery models of care may have on sustainable practice and nurturing healthy resilient behaviors remains uncertain. The notion of resilience in midwifery as the panacea to resolve current concerns may need rethinking. Resilience may be interpreted as expecting midwives 'to toughen up' in a workplace setting that is socially, economically and culturally challenging. Sustainability calls for examination of the reciprocity between environments of

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: s.a.crowther@rgu.ac.uk (S. Crowther), HunterB1@cardiff.ac.uk (B. Hunter), jmcaraco@aut.ac.nz (J. McAra-Couper), mhunter@aut.ac.nz (M. Hunter), afelder@aut.ac.nz (A. Fielder), maviskirkham@hotmail.co.uk (M. Kirkham).

working and the individual midwife. The findings invite further examination of contextual influences that affect the wellbeing of midwives across different models of care.

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Introduction

Sustainability and resilience are concepts which have recently come into use in the midwifery workforce literature (Wakelin and Skinner, 2007; Sullivan, Lock and Homer, 2011, Yoshida and Sandall, 2013). These notions have appeared within the literature around sustainable organisations (Kossek et al., 2014). This discussion paper aims to explore their relevance and usefulness within midwifery. The intention of this paper is not to provide a concept analysis or a systematic review of the literature but provide a comparative analysis of two distinct studies conducted by the authors. A comparative analysis compares and contrasts studies and highlights commonalities and points of difference that were not clearly seen before (Rihoux and Ragin, 2009). This paper draws on primary research conducted by the authors who explored sustainability and resilience within midwifery practice in New Zealand and the United Kingdom respectively. Comparative analysis of these notions and the themes which emerged from these studies, offers insights and consideration of their utility for investigating the wellbeing of the midwifery workforce.

Our discussion encompasses both the sustainability and resilience of the individual, and the sustainability and resilience of midwifery practice as a whole. We will refer to these studies as the New Zealand (NZ) sustainability study and the United Kingdom (UK) resilience study.

Definitions

Sustainability is a term used mainly in ecology, where it specifically refers to 'conserving an ecological balance by avoiding depletion of natural resources' (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2003). In other words, sustainability is the capacity of systems or processes to maintain balance and endure. When applied to individuals, such as midwives, the word 'endure' takes on the double meaning of continuing to practise in the face of the difficulties and adversities encountered in that practice. To 'sustain' also means to support or

maintain (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2003). Midwives not only support women in their childbearing, but also experience the social complexities of providing and receiving collegial support.

Resilience means to be 'able to withstand or recover quickly from difficult conditions' (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2003). Also an ecological concept, it covers the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and still retain its basic structure and viability. It implies that an individual or system needs to be prepared to live with whatever surprise and disturbance arises (Folke, 2006). This term is also applied to organisations, businesses and individuals. For example Anderies et al. (2004) refers to the robustness of systems that maintain stability despite unexpected changes. Resilience in physics is about the elasticity of materials, and elasticity is also an important factor in individual and organisational resilience. For example Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison (2016) suggest that a resilient individual is someone that has the 'the capacity to bounce back from a negative force' (p4). The definition of resilience differs to that of sustainability, as resilience requires an element of difficulty, which is responded to either by holding steady, or by reacting but then quickly resuming a normal state.

Applying sustainability and resilience to midwifery

A number of disciplines have contributed to the study of sustainability and resilience in the healthcare workforce and amongst health profession students (see, for example, Tusaie and Dyer, 2004; Jeffcott et al., 2009; McAllister and McKinnon, 2009; Dyrbye et al., 2010). Some studies have a primarily psychosocial emphasis, focusing upon the individual characteristics of those who appear to best tolerate working practices common in the health professions such as shift work (see Saksvik et al., 2011 for a systematic review). Research such as that by Suwazono et al (2010) has adopted a biochemical approach to study the impact of shiftwork on individuals. Some studies have taken a more sociological approach, such as the research on 'Why Midwives Stay' which explored midwives' work motivation and their sources of job

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