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Engaging with clinical supervision in a community midwifery setting: an action research study

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this research study was to explore midwives’ views and experiences of their support needs in clinical practice and then to identify how they would wish to receive such support. There was much literature to support the existence of stress and burnout in midwifery but no research that addressed ways of alleviating this. Further aims were to redress that imbalance by planning and facilitating a model of clinical supervision devised by the participating midwives.

The study took an action research approach that involved working with a group of eight National Health Service (NHS) community midwives in a collaborative, non-hierarchical and democratic way in order to achieve change. This accorded with a woman-centred approach to working with clients that was being encouraged within midwifery. The midwives were typical of many community-based midwives in the United Kingdom (UK) who were working in increasingly stressful, complex and changing environments.

Wider organisational and cultural issues are considered that affect working relationships. The nature of the way the midwives worked when they were offered and received support, and how they reacted and coped when their work team and work situation was threatened, was also explored.

Each midwife was interviewed twice; before and after the experience of clinical supervision. They also participated in two focus groups before clinical supervision. In-depth individual interviews lasted up to two hours, as did the focus groups. The interviews and the focus groups were taped, transcribed and then analysed using a relational voice-centred methodology.

The main findings were that recent and ongoing change plus the organisational demands placed on the midwives by the NHS and their managers were detrimental to working relationships with their colleagues and clients. This also inhibited the process of change. A discourse of denigration became apparent within the interviews and the midwives behaviour and coping strategies revealed some well developed defence mechanisms, as well as an apparent lack of understanding on their part and that of their midwifery managers in relation to emotion work. Resistance to change was a key defence mechanism used by the midwives.

Strong messages emerge about certain ‘performances’ being available to midwives and the use of defence mechanisms as a way of ‘getting the work done’. There are also messages about the cultural legacy of midwifery and how this can inhibit autonomous behaviour by midwives. Developing and increasing self awareness is still not viewed as being intrinsic to the work of the midwife and midwives are being asked to undertake a level of work that they have not been adequately prepared for. Neither do there appear to be effective role models for midwives. The bureaucratic pressures of working in a large maternity unit are also addressed where the system is seen as more important than the midwives.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many, many people who have unknowingly contributed to the successful completion of this study. I sincerely thank them all, but in particular I would like to take this opportunity to thank the following people.

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Professor Mavis Kirkham, as my research supervisor, has provided infinite support, constantly reinforcing my ability to undertake this research as well as write the thesis. She has inspired me, trusted me, been patient with me and above all, valued me and my contributions to midwifery. Her calming presence has helped me throughout this research journey.

I would like to thank Joss, Dawn, and all the midwives who participated in the study. Without their help and time this study would not have been possible. Joss and Dawn especially have helped me to think differently. I am also grateful to the midwifery managers for providing access to the participating midwives and the maternity unit.

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I also thank Christine Horrocks who joined me at the later stages of my research journey. Her encouragement, friendship and willingness to comment on drafts have been enormously helpful and motivating. She provided a certain ‘structure’ that was necessary for me at this crucial stage of my research journey.

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Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter One: INTRODUCTION</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The need for the study</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aims of the study</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting the scene</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key theoretical issues</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist theory</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanistic psychology</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselling theory</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Work theory</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychotherapeutic theory</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociological theory</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transforming the local maternity services</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glendale Work Team</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawn's influence on my study</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joss' influence on my study</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The organisation of the thesis</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter Two: VOICES AND ISSUES FROM PAST AND PRESENT MIDWIFERY

| The move from ‘disordered’ to ‘ordered’ practice | 20 |
| Achieving professional status or a means to control practice? | 21 |
| Dominant doctors and ‘disabled’ midwives | 22 |
| Statutory compliance: ‘supervising’ or ‘policing’ midwifery work? | 23 |
| Medicalisation of childbirth | 24 |
| Who knows? | 24 |
| The subjugation of midwifery knowledge | 28 |
| Invisible midwifery expertise and invisible women | 29 |
| Technological surveillance and intervention | 30 |
| Adapting to, and changing ways of working | 31 |
| The effects of changing approaches to care | 33 |
| The impact of changing work patterns on the midwifery workforce | 34 |
Chapter Three: CHANGE, CULTURE, ‘CARING’ AND RELATIONSHIPS

Part 1: Culture and change in the NHS

The culture of midwifery in the NHS
The context of change in the NHS
Differing approaches to change
Sowing the seeds of change
Culture as a key influence on change
Midwives as obedient technicians
Change managing midwives
Detachment as a monitoring process
‘Militating organisational imperatives’

Key points emerging

Part 2: The midwife-mother relationship

First relationship crucial to subsequent relationships
Providing a holding environment
Providing a secure base
Community-based work as a refuge
The slipperiness of care
…….makes caring complex
The balancing act….becoming emotionally involved
Staying connected despite differences
Reciprocity: mutual aims and aspirations
Mediating between ‘connectedness’ and ‘detachment’
Picking the right balance
Different levels of engagement
Women as ‘natural carers’
The sentimental order of midwifery
Midwives’ ‘composure work’ – a form of task orientated care
Identity work – attending to nurturance, growth and healing
Therapeutic midwifery: being a ‘skilled companion’
Midwives as ‘gravy’
The consequences of partnership…devolving power

Key points emerging

Chapter Four: CLINICAL SUPERVISION – A POTENTIAL SOURCE OF SUPPORT

Strengthening or policing professional practice?
Learning lessons from other professions
Social work – ‘discussing cases’ or ‘anxious caseload management’
The concept of ‘supervisor’ – confusion and ‘definition quagmire’
‘Big sister is watching you’: supervision of midwives
The two hats – contradictions in midwifery supervision
Challenging midwifery supervision
Chapter Five: ACTION RESEARCH: OPENDING NEW DIALOGUES FOR ENQUIRY

The beginnings…action research in the making
Valuing process and outcomes
  Contextualising ‘real-world practice’
Defining action research
The nature of reality
  ‘Learning is rooted in experience’
Rejecting the search for truth
  Prescription and the imposition of control
  What about complex, messy clinical practice situations?
Naturalistic research: Subjectivity and shedding light on complex problems
  Whose knowledge…..whose practice counts?
Critical theory research: challenging politically constructed situations
  Models…approaches…typologies…traditions?
  Cycles and steps as repressive and mechanical
  Struggling in the swampy lowlands
Accepting certainty and valuing uncertainty
Feminisms and action research
The living theory approach
  Mapping imagined frameworks’ onto clinical practice
  Putting values “up-front”
Active versus passive participation
Chapter Six: METHODS

Placing ‘the self’ at the centre of the inquiry 167
Shaping the research with social, political and critical insight 167
A story of myself (6.12.00) 169
Childhood lasts a lifetime 169

Phase One
Gaining access 174
Gatekeeping access 174
Old habits die hard 175
Silencing mechanisms at play 176
Recruitment to the study 177
Excluding ‘others’ from the research 178

Phases One, Two and Three
Interviews as complex, social interactions 179
The influence of reciprocity 181
Listening to midwives’ voices 182
Listening to the voices of Susan, Sarah and Stella 183
Seeking spontaneous storytelling 184
The interviewer as a therapeutic resource 185
Is it necessary to draw a line in the sand? 186
Choosing the venue – feeling safer on your own patch 187
Coping with distractions and interruptions 188
Articulating ‘unarticulated experience’: helping each other out 189
The co-production of data within interviews 191

Phase Two
Hearing Joss’ voice 192

Focus groups as ‘natural social networks’ 193
Interaction as synergism 193
Focus groups equate with ‘time-efficiency’ 195
Silent voices…remaining an outsider 196
Focus groups as a forum for change 197
Facilitating focus groups 197
Observing interactions within focus groups 198

Issues of ethics and rigour 199
The appropriateness of reliability and validity in action research 202
Exercising professional imagination 203
### Phase Three

- Analysing the midwives’ accounts
  - “Starting up terror” – leaping into the unknown
  - The process of making sense
  - Facing myself….again

- The principles of voice-centred relational methodology
  - First reading: focusing on the plot by losing my own plot
  - Second reading: being with midwives
  - Third reading: achieving a sense of balance in relationships
  - Fourth reading: some voices are louder than others
  - Fifth reading: expressing emotion through metaphors
    - Metaphors as a form of expression

### Chapter Seven: PHASE ONE - PRELIMINARY INTERVIEWS

- THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE: CONFRONTING CRISIS AND PAIN

  - The roller coaster of constant change: onerous or exciting?
  - The tyranny of team midwifery: an unfair imposition.
  - Idealising past ways of working.
  - Coping with stress: feeling uptight, depressed and unable to go to work.
    - Habitual ways of working…collusive interaction and refusal to talk.
    - Bad care days…no time to listen and a fear of complex situations.
  - The rudderless ship…pulling differently and needing direction!
  - Pseudo-cohesion as a mask for unsupportive behaviour.
  - Ladylike saboteurs…’flies in the ointment’ or ‘doing good by stealth’.
  - Self denigration as a learned response and a way to discount needs.
  - ‘Shared’ or ‘clash’ of personal philosophies.
  - Generations of dinosaurs…the birth and death of oppressors.

- Key points emerging

### Chapter Eight: PHASE ONE - PRELIMINARY INTERVIEWS: MIDWIVES AS ‘EMOTIONAL LABOURERS’

- ‘Framing’ the story…midwifery work as ‘performance’
- Emotional labour
  - Longer client interactions = feeling ‘psychologically drained’
  - Burnout syndrome
  - ‘Professional closeness’ or detachment

- Relating to, and developing partnerships with women
  - ‘Psyching one’s self up’ – a coping strategy
  - Self presentation; coping and performance
  - Being ‘their friend’; feeling safe and suffering pain

- Emotional engagement: a source of energy or a stressor
Chapter Nine:  PHASE TWO - FOCUS GROUPS:
CLARIFYING SUPPORT NEEDS
AND PLANNING FOR CHANGE  

Focus group one: A forum to reflect on support needs and change  
   Observing group interaction  
   Silent voices huddling together  
Getting started...different forms of anxiety  
   Keeping 'team spirit' alive...despite obvious differences  
   Pussyfooting and 'smoothing over' as alternatives  
   Conversational rituals...trying to restore balance  
   Fear of exposing feelings...letting colleagues 'see inside'  
Attempting to meet support needs  
   Taking things further...new style of clinical support!  
   Fear of a new hierarchy  
   Celebrating midwifery versus use of a 'black book'  

Key points emerging from focus group one  

Dawn's input following the first focus group  

Focus group two: Working towards a supportive framework  
   'Them' and 'us' – pseudo-collusion as a defence mechanism  
   'Punching lights out': no power, anger and dissatisfaction  
   'Jumping on board' or resisting collaboration and responsibility  
Managing change...or not...through the study findings  
   Collaborating or colluding: yet another contradiction!  
   Different ways of working really means 'double visits'  
The way forward for the work team  
Even researchers get hurt...‘emotional pebbles and potholes’  

Key points emerging from focus group two  

Chapter Ten: PHASE THREE - FINAL INTERVIEWS

CHALLENGES AHEAD: DEVELOPING AN AWARENESS OF REALITY

An ‘opportunity’ or a ‘different space’
Cohesiveness as a means of keeping problems hidden
‘Pseudo-cohesion’ as a means of masking unsupportive behaviour
A challenge: time for reflection and possible change
Too great a challenge: no time and no support during turbulent change.
The need to feel safe: negotiating a safe environment
‘Contract setting’: working together towards a clinical supervision framework.
Making time for clinical supervision
Buying time: money makes midwives!
Time out to talk: spending valuable time
Time as a finite commodity…it costs money!
Time as a ‘sacrifice’: encroaching on others’ time
Taking time that is needed elsewhere
Group supervision: feeling safer in numbers
Feeling valued through equality and consistency
Imposing boundaries: limiting involvement or avoiding responsibility.
Feeling elitist: better to exclude than include
The dumping ground: a place for unloading distress
Help rejecting complainers: a means of expressing resentment or a reflection of reality
Different ways of acknowledging endings
The empty chair: avoidance behaviour or a call for help
Facing the challenge: presenting clinical material of concern
Towards a new understanding
Avoidance of issues
‘Pit-head time’ – an opportunity to discuss ‘casework moments’

Key points emerging

Chapter Eleven: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS..... AND BEYOND

The rhetorical challenge of midwifery
‘Cultures of conflict’
Insights into the performance of midwifery
Performances as bound by the clock
Insights into working relationships
Clinical supervision as an ‘unshackling process’ 398
Midwives who balance well 400
Pseudo-cohesion as a defence mechanism 401
Struggles and contradictions within action research 401
The way forward 404
Implications for midwifery education and further research 405

Recommendations for midwifery practice 408
Recommendations for further research 411

REFERENCES 413

APPENDICES 443

1. Description of the midwives 443
2. Interview Schedule (preliminary interviews) 450
3. Interview Schedule (focus group 1) 451
4. Interview Schedule (focus group 2) 452
5. Interview Schedule (final interviews) 453
List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Four: Clinical Supervision – an ‘unshackling process’</th>
<th>81</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1: Schools of psychotherapy or counselling as applied to clinical supervision</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2: Models of clinical supervision</td>
<td>99-100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Five: Action research: opening new dialogues for Enquiry</th>
<th>118</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 3: The position of the researcher</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Eight: Midwives as ‘emotional labourers’</th>
<th>249</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 4: Summary of the spectrum of ‘performances’ (as described in preliminary interviews)</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5: Midwives’ ways of emotional engagement in a bureaucratic context and their subsequent effects</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter One:</th>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1:</td>
<td>Flow Chart signposting phases and progress of study</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Four:</th>
<th>Clinical Supervision – an ‘unshackling process’</th>
<th>81</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2:</td>
<td>Hawkins &amp; Shohet's Double Matrix Model of Supervision.</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3:</td>
<td>Hybrid Model of Clinical Supervision.</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4:</td>
<td>The route to successful and effective clinical supervision.</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Five:</th>
<th>Action research: opening new dialogues for enquiry</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5:</td>
<td>Different approaches to action research in critical theory paradigm.</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>