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ENGAGING WITH CLINICAL SUPERVISION IN A COMMUNITY MIDWIFERY SETTING

AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

RUTH DEERY

A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

WOMEN’S INFORMED CHILDBEARING & HEALTH RESEARCH GROUP
SCHOOL OF NURSING AND MIDWIFERY

THE UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD
UK

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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.

My gratitude to my husband Patsy and my mother Teresa, who have provided endless support throughout the life of the study, is beyond words. They have been a tower of strength and encouragement for me as have my children, Nick, Laura and Emily who have ‘studied with me’. Nick became a Police Officer during the course of the study, Laura has taken her A levels and is preparing to go to University and Emily has taken her GCSEs…and they were only ‘babies’ when I started my research journey. My father Frank, who was very proud that I was studying for my doctorate died during the course of the research.

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.

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The West Yorkshire Education and Training Consortium (now known as West Yorkshire Workforce Development Confederation) provided funding through a small grant. Without this funding the study might not have proceeded to completion. I am also grateful to the University of Huddersfield who provided funding for my studies at the University of Sheffield.
Table of Contents

Abstract ii
Acknowledgements iii
List of Tables xii
List of Figures xiii

Chapter One: INTRODUCTION 1

The need for the study 2
Aims of the study 3
Setting the scene 4
Key theoretical issues 6
  Feminist theory 6
  Humanistic psychology 7
  Counselling theory 8
  Group Work theory 9
  Psychotherapeutic theory 10
  Sociological theory 11
Transforming the local maternity services 12
Glendale Work Team 14
Dawn’s influence on my study 15
Joss’ influence on my study 16
The organisation of the thesis 16

Chapter Two: VOICES AND ISSUES FROM PAST AND PRESENT MIDWIFERY 19

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
# The nature and range of clinical supervision

- 'Doing' clinical supervision
  - Individual supervision
  - Group supervision
  - Peer supervision

# Frameworks for clinical supervision

- The focus of clinical supervision
  - Hunt’s three approaches to supervision
  - Double Matrix Model
  - Triadic model of supervision
  - Six Category Intervention Analysis
  - Cyclical Model of Counsellor Supervision
  - Growth and Support Model
  - Guided Reflection or ‘professional narcissism’
  - Interactive Model
  - Nicklin’s six-stage supervision cycle
  - Problem orientated supervision
- A hybrid model of clinical supervision
- Practical route to successful clinical supervision
- Key points emerging

## Chapter Five: ACTION RESEARCH: OPENING 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
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research ‘with’ rather than ‘on’: a conjoint experience</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The balance of power…</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becoming a political entrepreneur!</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blurred boundaries – dealing with political behaviour</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key points emerging</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter Six: METHODS</strong></td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placing ‘the self’ at the centre of the inquiry</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaping the research with social, political and critical insight</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A story of myself (6.12.00)</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childhood lasts a lifetime</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phase One</strong></td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaining access</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gatekeeping access</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old habits die hard</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silencing mechanisms at play</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment to the study</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excluding ‘others’ from the research</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phases One, Two and Three</strong></td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews as complex, social interactions</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The influence of reciprocity</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to midwives’ voices</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to the voices of Susan, Sarah and Stella</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking spontaneous storytelling</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The interviewer as a therapeutic resource</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is it necessary to draw a line in the sand?</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choosing the venue – feeling safer on your own patch</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping with distractions and interruptions</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Articulating ‘unarticulated experience’: helping each other out</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The co-production of data within interviews</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phase Two</strong></td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearing Joss’ voice</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus groups as ‘natural social networks’</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction as synergism</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus groups equate with ‘time-efficiency’</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silent voices…remaining an outsider</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus groups as a forum for change</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitating focus groups</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observing interactions within focus groups</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Issues of ethics and rigour</strong></td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The appropriateness of reliability and validity in action research</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercising professional imagination</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Phase Three

206

Analysing the midwives’ accounts

‘Starting up terror’ – leaping into the unknown

The process of making sense

Facing myself….again

209

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

210

211

212

213

214

215

216

Chapter Seven: PHASE ONE - PRELIMINARY INTERVIEWS
THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE:
CONFRONTING CRISIS AND PAIN

220

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 upright, 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

221

223

226

227

232

234

236

237

238

242

244

245

247

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

249

‘Framing’ the story…midwifery work as ‘performance’

Emotional labour

– Long 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

251

254

256

256

260

262

262

263

264

266
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
List of Tables

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

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Eight: Midwives as ‘emotional labourers’</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 4: Summary of the spectrum of ‘performances’ (as described in preliminary interviews)</td>
<td>249</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: Introduction</th>
<th>Figure 1: Flow Chart signposting phases and progress of study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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