

Exploring student midwives creative expression of the meaning of birth

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Abstract

This paper presents a study which explored creative pieces made by student midwives during an educational session on spirituality in relation to midwifery.

Background: Exploration of methods of teaching relating to midwifery has been limited, specifically relating to effective learning about spirituality. There is a current expectation in the UK that student midwives will be able to meet spiritual needs as part of a holistic approach to care. However, there has been limited exploration in the literature of ways to facilitate this learning. Creative art has been suggested to be a way of exploring personal spirituality; therefore we have introduced this option in an attempt to enable exploration of the concepts of spirituality.

Method: A group of 16 midwifery students in their second year were initially present in the session. Retrospective exploration of five creative pieces the students made showing their personal meaning of birth was carried out using a framework devised from visual methodology in addition with a questionnaire.

Findings: The experience of creating birth art and the teaching session as a whole was viewed as valuable in raising issues of spirituality and meaning in relation to birth. The creative pieces explored demonstrated students views of the principles of new life, the universality of birth, connection to the world outside the family, and the inclusion of love in the process.

Conclusion: The students' artistic creations in this study illustrated their beliefs and values about birth at that moment in time. Their creations demonstrated their views of birth being symbolic of new life and growth; that it has a universal effect, not only the family, but outwardly on the social community and beyond; and that it is linked with the value of love. We interpret this to be relating to the elements of spirituality within birth. We suggest that approaching the meaning of birth through creativity and the concepts of spirituality may be a valuable component of creating holistic midwives and will need to be explored by further research.

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1. Introduction

The subject of spirituality appears to have been a neglected aspect of the formal midwifery curriculum in the United Kingdom, though it is recognised to be an intrinsic part of midwifery care that has been under researched or acknowledged (Hall, 2001). To address this we have developed education sessions intended to provide student midwives

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with an understanding of concepts of spirituality. A creative approach has been used, utilising different mediums of video, music, aroma and storytelling, including opportunity for the students to be creative. However, these methods have been rarely evaluated and the study aims to add to the knowledge base.

1.1. Context of study

It is stated that midwifery programmes should include education to prepare midwives to care for women from different religious and cultural groups (Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC), 2004a). Further, in the current Midwives Rules (NMC, 2004b) there is implication that midwifery education programmes should include an understanding of the nature of spirituality and the impact of this on people's lives which is underpinned by an inherent philosophy of holistic care. We believe this to be, 'multidimensional, person-centred care' that includes reference to physical, psychological, spiritual and social aspects (Greenstreet, 2006; p. 25). This highlights how the concepts of spirituality and religion are often used interchangeably and that being able to meet women's religious and cultural needs implies attention to the spiritual domain. We argue that it is important for midwives to recognise there is a distinction between the two concepts in order to provide appropriate care.

Achieving an agreed definition of spirituality is problematic. Many have attempted to devise a definition (McSherry, 2006; Meraviglia, 1999; Robinson, Kendrick, & Brown, 2003; Swinton, 2001; Tanyi, 2002; Waugh, 1992). Their aim is to be all-encompassing however the outcomes tend to be lengthy circular statements, to the extent of devoting whole chapters of books to eliciting a definition (Greenstreet, 2006; McSherry, 2006). A more accessible approach to understanding of spirituality may be an exploration of the elements relevant to an individual's spirituality, for example searching for meaning and purpose, connecting relationships and transcendence (Hall, 2001). Religion in contrast tends to be more structured with a shared system of beliefs and practices (Taylor et al., 2004). Tanyi (2002) also acknowledges the important distinction that must be made as many people express their spirituality through their religions values and beliefs. Paley (2008) draws our attention to the increase in interest in spirituality in health care despite apparent decreasing religious attendance in the UK population. However if midwives are expected to practice within a holistic paradigm that believes all persons have a spiritual nature then we need to recognise that those without religious persuasion will also have a spiritual need and that belonging to a religion does not necessarily imply spiritual awareness.

Vaughan (2002; p. 17) compares spirituality to emotion indicating both have 'varying degrees of depths and expression'. In our experience students also question how spiritual care differs to emotional care. The difference between emotional, psychological and spiritual care is difficult to distinguish and overlaps. It is suggested that developing spiritual awareness in health care will contribute to the overall psychological wellbeing and adjustment to life's challenges (Young, Cashwell, & Shcherbakova, 2000). They also argue that it is important carers should understand their own spirituality in order to care of others effectively. Nevertheless we believe spirituality is more than an individual's emotions and psychology which encompasses wholeness and meaning and purpose to life. '... to be spiritual means ... to become fully human' (Long, 1997; p. 507). The need to explore their spiritual selves is a trait of human beings (Tanyi, 2002). However, the very act of defining spirituality, separates it from the wholeness of the person, and may serve to restrict the concept of holistic care (Goddard, 1995).

Nursing education frameworks recognises the value of spiritually based care, especially in the context of living with life threatening illness or at the end of life (e.g. Cobb & Robshaw, 1998; Greenstreet, 2006; McSherry, 2006; Orchard, 2001; Robinson et al., 2003). However, the literature has hardly begun to explore the contribution of spiritual care in pregnancy and childbirth. We consider it to be inconsistent that there has been so little appreciation of the value of recognising the spiritual potential of life at its beginnings. It is suggested that the facilitation of effective teaching and learning of spirituality is a challenge (McSherry, 2000). There appears to be agreement that educating healthcare students around spirituality is of benefit but, how to teach the subject is less defined (Bradshaw, 1997; McSherry, 2000; Narayanasamy, 1993; White, 2006). With knowledge of these difficulties we have developed sessions intending to provide midwifery students with an understanding of concepts of spirituality and its relationship to pregnancy and childbearing. The teaching and learning methods include exploration of theory and research. However, it is questionable if this is sufficient to enable deeper learning. Our belief that students are also 'spiritual' beings has led us to develop sessions to enable them to explore their own feelings about their spiritual selves. The use of the mediums of video, music, aroma and storytelling, combined with an opportunity for the students to express their own selves through creative art (Cameron, 1993), has been developed. Although the use of creative methods of teaching are recommended

in some Higher Education texts (Heron, 2002; Sternberg and Williams, 1996) they are not extensively used in midwifery education (Davies and Wickham, 2007) and are currently rarely evaluated.

We identify with the concern that current educational systems are stifling ‘creative potential’ in health care students (Fasnacht, 2003). This lends support to our underpinning teaching philosophy that students are not just intellectual beings. We agree with Davies and Wickham (2007; p. 191) that most students remain passive in the current formats of education. The proponents of art therapy recognise the worth of a more ‘rounded’ approach (Robbins, 1994) and it is suggested that the use of imagination is ‘a critical component of adaptive behavior because it allows the organism to improvise when faced with a changing set of circumstances’ (Palmer, 1995). Therefore we suggest encouraging creative imagination in the students may lead them to be more open to how they respond to those they care for in the future, as they will then recognise these aspects in others. Steiner (2002; p. 101) suggests that ‘right attitudes’ can be enhanced by increasing our creativity. His implication is that creativity encourages self-growth and consequently a desire for wholeness and good. Though we cannot teach ‘right attitudes’ there is potential that the judicious use of exploring more creative methods may encourage the development of positive attitudes. This is currently an area that requires research in order to demonstrate this effectiveness.

It has been stated that art has potentially a spiritual nature (e.g. Allen, 1995; Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002; Clift and Hancox, 2006; Kandinsky, 1977; Palmer, 1995; p. 94). Further, the psychotherapist Winnicott (1971; p. 53) explores this interlinking concept of creativity in enabling discovery of the self. If we accept that value, meaning and purpose are elements of spirituality (Burkhardt, 1994; Burnard, 1988; Dyson, Cobb, & Forman, 1997; Labun, 1988; Waugh, 1992) exploiting creative potential may provide a link with the spiritual dimension of the person. However, creative methods may be viewed by students as merely of novelty value (Mitchell & Hall, 2007), which would limit the potential for any depth of exploration of spiritual dimensions. It is possible that students withhold full engagement within the context of the class room and we recognise we can only offer them the opportunity to participate.

There is also a suggestion that creative expression may be a particular way for women to express spirituality (Burkhardt, 1994). The current research on women’s spirituality is limited, and making a division between men and women’s characteristics may be inappropriate (Hall, 2001; pp. 13–17). However both Jung (1966; p. 103) and Winnicott (1971; p. 72) wrote of the feminine quality of the creative act. Given that the majority of student midwives are women the use of creative arts and the spirit of the person within midwifery may thus be interlinked. Although the use of art is recognised for its potential in a number of disciplines such as psychotherapy, art and music therapies (Clift and Hancox, 2006; Robbins, 1994; Updike, 1994) it deserves evaluation in midwifery education to identify its value in exploring the contribution to the understanding of spirituality.

Creative arts have been used in different ways in health care practices. For example innovative parent education classes for preparation for birth use creativity as a method to aid parents in their journey towards being parents (England and Horowitz, 1998; Davies, 2002). Furthermore Swan-Foster, Foster, and Dorsey (2003) have found that creative drawing is a potential tool for the diagnosis of depression in pregnant women. The use of creative arts have been perceived to be beneficial to students on a midwifery course in an Australian context (Jackson and Sullivan, 1999). However, no attempt at evaluation of what was produced or the meanings the students derived from the experiences appears to have been made. Clarity is also required as to whether there are any problems or limitations related to this method of learning for the students or teachers involved.

1.2. *Spirituality session*

As part of the session the students were invited to make something that indicated to them the meaning of birth. The time given for this educational activity was short (10 min) to prevent those with artistic training from utilising those skills; further it is also suggested that the creations will give an indication of their internal feelings and beliefs at that moment (Hall, 2007). These creations form the basis of our study. A description of the session is available in a previous article (Mitchell & Hall, 2007).

1.3. *Aims*

The principle aim of our study was to explore the meanings student midwives attribute to birth by examining the creative pieces and written explanations produced in the facilitative session described. Furthermore we aimed to explore the effectiveness and value of this creative activity as a teaching method.

2. Methodology

The different forms of knowledge to be explored within this study meant that the analysis of any data required an approach that would reflect this investigation. Therefore it was based on a ‘critical visual methodology’ (Rose, 2001). Rose (p3) states this is ‘an approach that thinks about the visual in terms of the cultural significance, social practices and power relations in which it is embedded.’ The choice of this methodology was made with the requirement to explore the creative pieces made by the students in the context of the teaching session as student midwives and in their life as women. This reflects the principle of holism and recognises students do not experience or create anything that is not affected by and does not impact on all aspects of their personality and being. However Rose’s methodology was designed for photographs, which proved to have some limitations when applied to three dimensional abstract pieces.

The nature of qualitative inquiry means that approaches to it must aim to understand an issue, ‘through the eyes of those who experience it’ (Rees, 2003; p. 11). Therefore analysis of the creative pieces needed to establish the views of its creator. We recognise that our society relies on the use of language to describe and understand (Banks, 2001; pp. 8–9). The fact we asked students to produce a description of their piece in addition to the visual illustrates our fear to restrict the study to just the visual, and anxiety on the reliance on the validity of our own views and discussion of the art. There is also a question of whether the external expression through words is a true reflection of the internal expression of the created piece (Banks, 2001; p. 11). However this additional information appeared to provide a greater insight into the context of the production as we were able to give the students a ‘voice’ to explain their piece.

We initiated a pilot study on nine students from a previous cohort of student midwives to try out the questionnaire and the method of evaluation. Unfortunately only one student responded. However the wealth and depth of information this exercise elicited demonstrated that the process had some validity and we chose to include the creative piece produced in this report.

2.1. *Sample/participants*

We invited a group of 16 female student midwives who had participated in the session in their second year of training. Five students returned the questionnaire, two included the creative piece and a description, and two others did not include a personal description and one only returned the questionnaire. We have chosen to include within the process the creative piece and data from a student from a previous group. This gave us a total of five creative pieces to examine. It was not clear whether these students were representative of the whole group. To attempt to understand this we sent a post study letter to the entire group asking their reasons for not responding at the time. A few respondents indicated they had valued the session but had personal reasons for not participating in the study, relating to illness, and time. One student indicated they had used the artwork she had created at a playgroup speaking about issues to do with motherhood, indicating the value she placed on the creative approach used. We recognise that the information presented is limited by the exploration from a select group of student midwives. The process has raised many questions for us on the process of the study and on the examination of creative material which will be discussed later.

2.2. *Data collection*

Our initial aim had been to carry out a prospective study, recruiting the students during the session. However delay in ethical approval meant that the study was retrospective. The students were contacted via letter and were asked to submit their creative piece and write about what it felt creating it and what it meant to them, and complete the questionnaire. They were asked to use a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. We were aware that response to questionnaires by letter may be poor (Edwards et al., 2002), and there was potential that they may have discarded their artwork and would be unable to send the piece back for examination. Further concerns were that those who had chosen to discard their piece may have felt negatively toward the whole experience of the session. This would lead to the information we received more likely to have been from those who had experienced the session as positive.

The questionnaire sought demographic information on the age and gender of the participant, whether they have had children or not and how old they are. This was to establish whether the age and personal experience of the students had an impact on their creative pieces and views of the session. We also attempted to establish whether artistic or



Fig. 1.

creative training or regular involvement in such activities had an influence (Wikstrom, 2003). Further information on any religious or spiritual activity students were involved in was also established. This was to address the potential link between spirituality and creative expression (Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002; pp. 173–174). Analysis of the questionnaire can be found elsewhere (Mitchell & Hall, 2007).

The choice of questionnaire as opposed to interview could be challenged as the latter could elicit greater understanding of the issues (Rees, 2003; p. 128). We were concerned the students' knowledge of our specific interest in the development of this session may have led them to feel obliged to give more positive answers than if the interviewer was unknown to them and unrelated to the programme of study. Also the personal nature of some of the information requested may mean the students would feel more comfortable at expressing their answers in writing rather than to face to face (Rees, 2003; p. 128). Combining the student's description and answers to the questions aimed to construct a more holistic picture of the meaning of the creative piece and increase credibility and trustworthiness of the study. This paper will report on the information we gained specifically from the creative pieces (Figs. 1–5).

2.3. *Ethical considerations*

Ethical approval was obtained for the study from the Faculty and University ethical committees. We were acutely aware of the vulnerable position we were placing the students and the powerful position we held as lecturers and researchers (Clark & McCann, 2005). The nature of qualitative research relies on willingness of the student to reveal their personal experiences (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001). The fact that this study was carried out by known lecturers, with the potential assessment of the student at some stage, may have had an effect on their readiness to reveal personal information. Clear written information was given to enable the students to make appropriate choice about participation, and rights to withdraw. Further permission was asked for the photographic evidence of their creations to be used in future papers or presentations (Banks, 2001; p. 131).

Anonymity is preserved as much as possible through the use of pseudonyms. It is recognised that other students present during the session may potentially be able to recognise other participants through descriptions given. Connection of demographic data to the creative pieces is avoided as much as possible in reporting the study to protect identities however this made some aspects of the presentation of the analysis problematical in trying to describe the whole person.

Orb et al. (2001) argue that the ethical principle of justice is shown by the researcher 'recognising the vulnerability of the participants and their contributions to the study'. Some students experienced the process of creative expression



Fig. 2.

during the teaching session as intensely emotional (Chinn & Watson, 1994). We acknowledged this by developing appropriate action plans to deal with a range of student responses that may arise during the teaching sessions and subsequent study. Two midwife teachers were always present for the teaching session, one being available to support students if required. The students were also informed of the Faculty Student Support structures in which counselling and other services are available. The questions on the questionnaire were chosen carefully and mostly open-ended, with the aim of discovering what the respondents wanted to say rather than our agenda as researchers (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000; p. 146). It is recognised sensitivity is required in asking questions about previous birth experiences or spirituality as they are personal in nature (Rees, 2003; p. 123) and it was reiterated to the students that support is available if required.



Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.

There was potential that the students would be concerned by perceived criticism of their art linked with bias of interpretation (Rose, 2001). The aim in the study was not to be critical but to identify links and themes between all those presented as part of the study and this was indicated to the participants in the information sheet. There was further potential that our 'judgement' may have been influenced by the fact that they were present in the room where the art was being created (Chinn and Watson, 1994). The benefit of having two researchers ensured that themes could be identified jointly and reduce the potential for bias.

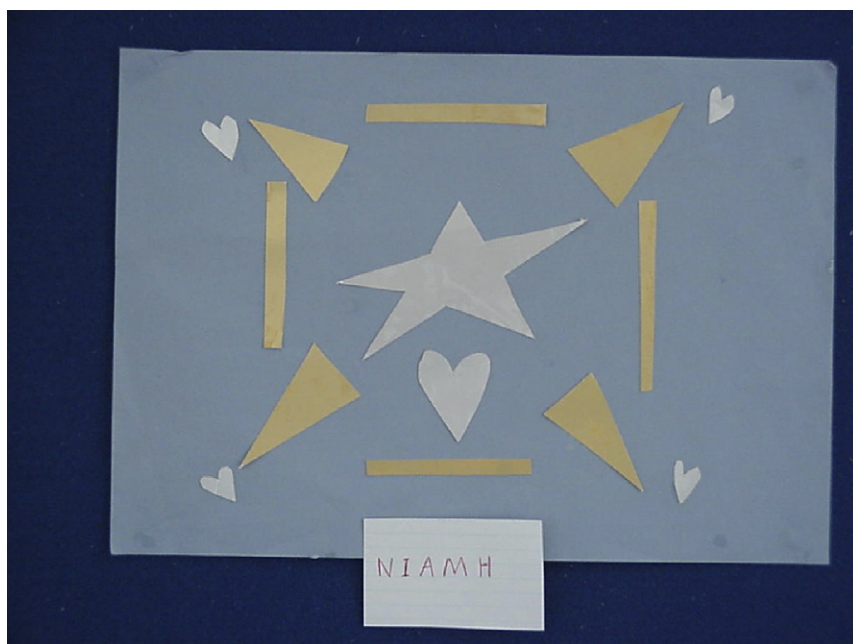


Fig. 5.

Box 1 Questions used to analyse creative pieces**Appendix 2 Visual methodology analysis based on Rose (2001)****Questions about the image**

- What is being shown? What are the components of the image? How are they arranged?
- Where is the viewer's eye drawn to in the image, and why?
- What relationships are established between the components of the image visually?
- What use is made of colour?
- What materials were used?
- What knowledges have been used by the student to create the image?
- Is this a contradictory image?
- Is there text on the image? Does the text describe what is on the picture or add to the context of the picture?
- Does the written description of the image match what has been made?
- Do any of the components of the image match components create in other pictures?

2.4. Analysis of the creative pieces

In order to analyse the images Rose (2001; p. 188) indicates there needs to be understanding of:

- The site of production—how an image is made?
- The site of the image itself—what it looks like?
- The site of its audiencing—how the image is seen?

Within the context of the study the focus was mostly on the construction of the image and the image itself as the researchers would be the only 'audience'. However analysis could also be made of the impact of the image on ourselves as the viewer.

Rose (2001) also suggests the need to understand these three sites by:

- Technological—'the tools and equipment used to make the image'.
- Compositional—'the visual construction, qualities and reception of an image'.
- Social—'the social, economic, political and institutional practices and relations that produce, saturate and interpret an image' (p. 188).

Discussion about the social context is enlarged by Banks (2001; p. 12) who states:

'Good visual research rests upon a judicious reading of both internal and external narratives'.

This implies the study required an understanding and description of the context in which the art had been made, the group dynamics, the session before the creative part took place, the place the students were within themselves, the relationships between the teacher and the group and the materials they are given to create with. Recognition that they were students studying midwifery and that this particular group were women were also significant in the social exploration of the pieces.

Rose (2001) describes different methods of analysis of visual images which are photographic in origin. The difference with this study was that the pieces were created with many different mediums and some were abstract as opposed to recognizable as a person or place. Therefore analysis involved using a series of questions about the pieces based on those suggested by Rose (2001; pp. 188–190) to enable transparency to the process at the same time recognising our subjectivity (see Box 1).

Using principles of investigator triangulation (Cohen et al., 2000; p. 113), analysis of the creative pieces and written information were carried out individually by the researchers. To enhance credibility (Cohen et al., 2000; p. 108; Rees, 2003; p. 51) the creative pieces were examined on their own, then in combination with the creators description, followed by an examination of details from the questionnaire. This ensured that the impact and our analysis of the piece was not influenced by the creator's description. Participants were then provided with a summary of the researcher's written analysis of their work. They were asked to comment on the interpretation and returned any comments to us; these have been incorporated into the analysis.

We viewed the artwork independently then returned together to share experiences and interpretations. Both researchers found it necessary to observe the artwork in an uncluttered space, in silence, and to first view the picture and then the written word. The analysis of the artwork created challenges for the researchers. JH felt that in viewing the artwork a sense of observing something sacred, intensely personal to the student who had created it. In addition both researchers questioned their right to make interpretations or establish meaning from the artwork or whether all that matters is the artists own view, meaning and significance of the work. Intuitively, JH felt the need to create a drawing which encompassed elements from all the participants' creative pieces. We acknowledge that our experiences as mothers, midwives and teachers significantly influence our interpretation of the artwork. Thus our interpretations must be considered within this social and life context. Some of these concerns diminished when we compared our separate interpretations; then compared them to the descriptions given by the students and when our interpretation was validated by the students' comments on them.

2.5. *Knowledge's used in construction*

This aspect of the analysis was difficult to establish by just looking at the pictures. Knowing that the creations represented the meaning of birth inspired us to identify personal 'meaning' from them. This knowledge represents the midwifery knowledge (Wickham, 2004; p. 163) that needs to break through the more patriarchal boundaries of the obstetric systems.

Another knowledge that could be represented is the social structure of birth. If these creations represented the student's personal meanings, which could be an aspect of their spiritual experience, our interpretations could be related to our own spirituality instead of establishing theirs. The potential ambiguity of this question led to discussion between us regarding the issue of knowledge.

In interpreting the pieces we looked at them individually and then combined our views to establish whether we had seen the same or differently. In some areas there were discrepancies on our interpretation and we wondered how we could resolve these. As researchers we are the 'audience' looking in on something intensely personal and individual, but viewing from our personal subjective viewpoints. We questioned how appropriate it is to aim to establish links or themes between the interpretations.

3. Findings

The descriptive data about the participants is presented in Table 1

3.1. *Themes from creative pieces*

It was apparent from the students' descriptions that they had created the art for themselves and not for anyone else. For some of them evidence of sticky tack on the back or pin holes indicated it had been placed on a wall since production, with the suggestion that this had some significance to them. In all instances we chose to observe the art non-photographically.

3.2. *Description*

Both researchers described the artwork using the intended criteria.

Colour. Dominant colours-red, bright yellows, blues, pinks and gold.

Shapes. Apart from Niamh's abstract picture, all used round, soft shapes such as the sun, balloons, hearts, flowers and people.

Table 1
Demographic data

N: 6

Age range 20–30

Birth experience prior to being a student midwife: two had given birth

1. Present at birth of sister's baby
2. No previous experience

Art: 4 GCSE art, 1 12–14 art lessons, 1 A level art, 1 art for children course

Creative leisure activities: one painting, one embroidery

Religious activity: 1 weekly attendance at Catholic mass

Spiritual activity: 1 relaxation with music with a friend followed by discussion of feelings and problems

- 1 acupuncture and yoga weekly
- 1 stated placement spiritual at times

Texture and materials. A wide variety of materials were utilised. All had depth and texture, one was three-dimensional.

Symbols. All contained universal symbols of life or growth. Two creations had a picture of the sun as a central theme, one setting over what looked like the sea while the other was whole and central in the picture. Another had a flower. Four of the pieces had a heart on their creation in some form. All five pictures showed a symbol of leading outwards, radiating stars and triangles (Niamh), radiating sun (Minnie and Rachel) pipe cleaner leading out (Daisy) balloon shape with ribbon leading to the outside (Ruby).

3.2.1. Relationship between components

All pieces had a large central component with peripheral images.

Text. Only one piece had text, which was the word “BIRTH” over scored and underlined with repetitive strokes.

3.3. Examination including the written description

3.3.1. Students' descriptions

There were three that we were able to analyse. From these themes were elicited:

1. Life and growth

‘The sun represents a new day and the birth of baby represents a new life.’ (Rachel)

‘The flower represents life and growth a life being nurtured for 9 months.’ (Ruby)

To Niamh the star and heart represented ‘new life and its potential for love’.

2. Continuation of process

The sun will continue to rise and babies will continue to be born. (Rachel Jones)

The hearts represent love felt for the baby not yet seen and the flower continues to grow for the rest of the child's life. (Ruby)

The gaps between the bars showed the possibility for ‘outside influences towards the new life, as well as the possibility for this new life to influence the world’ (Niamh)

3. Love

Niamh used love as a descriptor throughout her statement.

The star and heart represented ‘new life and its potential for love’. The spikes of the star and the corner triangles represented the possibility of spreading this love. The gold bars indicated the need for ‘security and love at the

birth', a protective factor . . . The outside hearts represented 'the spreading of love from the new life and the birth as a whole'

'The hearts represent love felt for the baby not yet seen and the flower continues to grow for the rest of the child's life' (Ruby)

3.4. *The image as a construct of social identity*

Only one student indicated in the questionnaire a personal religious belief. However universality and an individual's spirituality may have been represented by the choices of shapes in the creative pieces as the indication of new life. Images of the sun the stars and a womb as a balloon appear to ground the student's views of birth in creation itself. The placement of the connecting symbols, such as arrows and lines, seem to imply a link between the physicality of birth with its spiritual dimension. The representation of the outward directions of love as well as the relationship between mother, infant and partner also indicates the student's views of a spiritual dimension. We interpreted this as the student's recognition of the power of birth to impact on and influence society beyond the individual. The student's view of birth appears to be placed firmly in the spiritual and social realms.

4. Discussion

This study has evaluated student midwives creative work in relation to the meaning of birth. The experience of creating birth art in the teaching session was seen as valuable in raising issues of spirituality surrounding birth (Mitchell & Hall, 2007). Indeed they viewed this as an essential component of midwifery education. This supports the suggestion made by Hall (2001) that spirituality should be an intrinsic part of midwifery education. The students indicated that they were able to explore the meaning of birth through the use of the creative mediums, and to also find a connection with understanding spirituality. It appears that for these students the creative methods used enabled a link to the meaning of birth as a spiritual, rather than an emotional dimension.

4.1. *Spirituality and birth*

We interpreted that the focus of the students' art on symbols of nature, such as the sun, stars, flowers and sea, could be related to their current role as student midwives in the arrival of new life. The pieces represent the students' views of the universality of birth, the connection of the individual birth to the rest of the world or to the world outside the family. The fact that the group were all women, and dealing with women in their daily lives, may have had an influence on the symbols they chose to use. It has been noted that women's spiritual responses may be expressed through ecological values and through celebration of the power of the earth (King, 1993; pp. 208–211; Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002; pp. 221–223). The suggestion of the healing power of nature may also have been illustrated by the students and the association of this with the power of birth (Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002; pp. 225–227).

The students' art also demonstrated the connection of birth, both within the family and to the immediate and wider social context. (Burkhardt and Nagai-Jacobson, 2002; pp. 283–284; Hall, 2001; pp. 46–51). There did not appear to be a difference between those who had experienced a birth themselves and those who had not. We suggest this may be related to their experience of birth to date with their midwifery training. Their view of seeing birth as having a wider implication for the community is important when considering the present climate of technological intervention. Enabling the student midwife to explore these spiritual connections may have a wider impact on their relationships with women and their view of birth in the future (Odent, 2002). As only one student expressed a religious belief we could not address whether this had any impact on the students exploration of spirituality.

The representation of love through the use of hearts also demonstrated an element of spirituality and the students understanding of the importance of this factor in the birth experience. Odent (1999) has suggested the importance love plays in the dynamics of normal labour and maternal relationships. However not all the students used this image and we suggest this may have been dependent on the students own personal experiences of loving relationships. Not all women may have experienced pregnancy as a result of a loving relationship, or will experience love of their child (Hall, 2001; p. 57). It cannot be assumed that student midwives will all have a view of love being a spiritual component of birth. Love is viewed as being a spiritual need (McSherry, 2006; p. 56) and this need is within all persons and therefore

within student midwives as well. There is potential that this exercise may have exposed the inner needs of some of the students. However without challenging the individual students on why images of love had been left out of the creations we cannot assume this to be true.

4.2. Creativity as an educational strategy

Information obtained from the questionnaire revealed the students welcomed the use of creative methods for a variety of reasons (Mitchell & Hall, 2007), including the originality of the approach. A realistic criticism could therefore be that the appeal lies in its novelty value. However the students' recognised that a way to enhance individual learning is through a range of differing approaches. In this context the use of creative methods was viewed as appropriate to encourage students to consider issues of spirituality in relation to themselves and to pregnancy and childbirth.

4.3. Limitations of the study

A crucial issue raised by this research and its visual methodology lies in our interpretation of the creative pieces and whether because of who we are as researchers/midwives/mothers and what we subconsciously want to see differs in what is to what was really there. Banks (2001; p. 7) states:

'Sometimes . . . our initial understandings or readings of visual images are pre-scripted, written in advance, and it is useful to attempt to stand back from them, interrogate them, to acquire a broader perspective'.

The potential is that our own opinions have been preformed through our social construction as women/mothers/midwives giving us a view already of what the students will create. This will also have been affected by our knowledge of what students have previously created in other groups. The words we use to express what we see are indicative of how we want to put the art into words but may not be the right ones. This may have introduced a bias of interpretation. The returning of our interpretation to the students aimed for validation and recognition that they are collaborators and 'active creators and shapers of the research process' (Banks, 2001; p. 45). It was heartening to receive two back which indicated we were on the right track with what we had written. This was also reinforced with making links with the descriptions and data from the questionnaires. This gave us a mixture of the visual interpretation versus the use of words. It has challenged us to establish if we are more comfortable with the latter. The discomfort we feel has relationship with the subjectivity of audiencing another's personal work.

In addition whether the students were influenced by what another was doing could be challenged. Even though the session was in a dimmed room there was potential for a student to view others at work. Giving such a short space of time to create was intended to prevent the students from having the opportunity to think too much about their actions, therefore they had to 'jump in' if they were going to be able to achieve the task in hand.

There is a question about the influence of the provision of the materials on them. Giving heart shapes or stars out of a packet may have influenced what they chose, as well as the range of colours given. We attempted to ensure there was a large range of material available and ensured there were all colours of the spectrum. There is also the potential that the dimmed lighting in the room may have affected what they saw in the colour in front of them. As there was an array of colours for students to choose from the use of bright colours used may have related to those having more visual impact in the dimmed lighting. The use of red in the picture was judged by us to indicate 'blood' or 'danger;' This may be a cultural view but one that appears to be widespread as 'red' appears to come from a Sanskrit word *ruhira* that means 'blood' (Gage, 1999; p. 110). However Gage also suggests that there may be a biological basis to viewing colour as 'colour effective vision is nearly a hundred times more common among white men than among white females' (p36). As we have been researching a predominantly female group it would be interesting to repeat this session with a group of male students to establish if there would be any difference in the use of colour.

5. Conclusion

The students' creations in this study illustrated a snapshot of their inner beliefs and values about birth at that moment in time. We interpreted from their creations and their written descriptions that their views that birth is symbolic of new life and growth; that it has a universal effect, not only the family, but outwardly on their social community and beyond; that it is linked with the value of love. Further we interpret this to be relating to the elements of spirituality (Hall, 2001)

within birth. We suggest that finding ways to approach the meaning of birth and the concepts of spirituality may be a valuable component of creating holistic midwives and will need to be explored by further research.

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