

Biesty L, Lalor J, OBoyle C (2011) An ethnographic study of in-labour transfer to hospital during planned home birth – To be there or not to be there?
University of Liverpool Management School & Keele University Ethnography Symposium, Cardiff 5th – 7th Sept

Abstract

Aim of the study: to explore and understand the structures and processes inherent in the transition between midwifery-led and obstetric-led care through exploring the transfer process for planned home birth where an in-labour transfer to hospital is required.

Background: The dominant model of maternity care in Ireland is located in hospital; based on an economic model where in order to increase throughput labour is augmented. In order to avoid what may seem unnecessary interventions some women choose to birth at home as an alternative. However, these women and the midwives who facilitate home birth are frequently seen by hospital based clinicians and the public as stepping outside the conventional model of care. Those who believe in birth in the community have a distinct view that birth is a normal physiological process whereas hospital based clinicians have in the past expressed a view that birth is only normal in retrospect. Conflicts of these ideologies peak during in-labour transfer from home to hospital.

It is inevitable that for a percentage of women in alternative models of care, transfer to obstetric led care will be necessary. The transfer process between these 2 very different cultures has not been explored. An exploration of the perspectives of all key stakeholders will focus on complex interactions between women; self employed community midwives, obstetric consultants and hospital based midwives and generate an understanding of the interface between these diametrically opposed models of maternity care.

Research Design: an ethnographic approach.

Sample: community midwives, women planning home birth, women who have experienced in-labour transfer from home to hospital, labour ward midwifery managers, consultant obstetricians will be purposively sampled to explore and understand their experiences of in-labour transfer.

Data Collection: In-depth interviews with all participants, observation of the antenatal discussions surrounding 'birth' between community midwives and women.

This paper will focus on the issues for a novice researcher in relation to ethnography and more specifically 'traditional' participant observation.

In this study participant observation will be limited to the antenatal discussion between the community midwife and the woman to whom she is offering care. In view of this limitation data on the broader culture and context of home birth in Ireland must be sought from other sources. However, some arguments could be made that in order to get an insight into the all issues surrounding transfer from home to hospital the researcher needs to 'be there', it is proposed that observation of the actual transfer will not occur for the following reasons –

- 1) the need to transfer is a phenomenon which may occur quickly (any place, any time, in any part of the country)
- 2) it is an intense time for women and midwives therefore the presence of the researcher could be seen as intrusive
- 3) the researcher could have an influence on the decision making process by being asked for a professional opinion, this was thought to have the potential to be counterproductive.

So to be there or not to be there ... therein lies the dilemma and the question the novice researcher asks.