

“Why are you here?” “Should I be here?”



**The experiences of men
who work as midwives**

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COMMENT

'What's it like being a male midwife?'

After 30 years of men in the profession, John Pendleton wonders why do we still need to ask this question?

As a clinician I consciously made the decision not to focus on my separateness as a 'male midwife'. This evolved partly after uncomfortable experiences with mentors who were unsure as to how to introduce me to labouring women. They would send me off to find a piece of equipment then disappear into the room of the woman we had been assigned. Waiting for permission to enter, I would overhear conversations such as, 'I'm working with a student, he's a man—is that OK? You don't have to have him if you don't want.' This highlighted to the labouring woman that this was an unusual situation which went against expected convention and placed me in the role of what Simpson



Reflections as an educator

asked, 'what's it like being a male midwife?' by the women I supported felt part of an organic exchange of information among equals when I was asking them to share personal information about their medical and social history. But I had moved from the private arena of the consulting room or the woman's home and was now putting myself in the public arena as an academic. Being asked as a lecturer 'what's it like being a male midwife?' felt very different. Given that men had been admitted to the profession for over 30 years and the fascination in their choice had not abated, I realised that my ambivalence to this question needed to be addressed.

A day in the life of... a male midwife

As one of just 173 male midwives registered in the UK, John Pendleton's used to a certain amount of curiosity about his job...



JOHN PENDLETON Trainee midwife

is one of the TV industry's periodic savants that helped persuade former programme-maker John Pendleton change careers. When director Mark Thompson embarked on his campaign to drastically slim down the BBC workforce by offering voluntary redundancies, Pendleton took full advantage, using it to help fund a new career as a midwife. Last September he started a three-year training course based at Northampton General Hospital.

"I decided to sell the house and move to Northampton for a better standard of living for my family," he declares. "Actually leaving the BBC was scary," admits the 34-year-old, "but I needed to take control of my career and opportunities at the BBC were shrinking. I have no regrets." Pendleton recalls that the further his BBC career progressed, the further he got from the hands-on programme-making he loved. "I'd been at the BBC

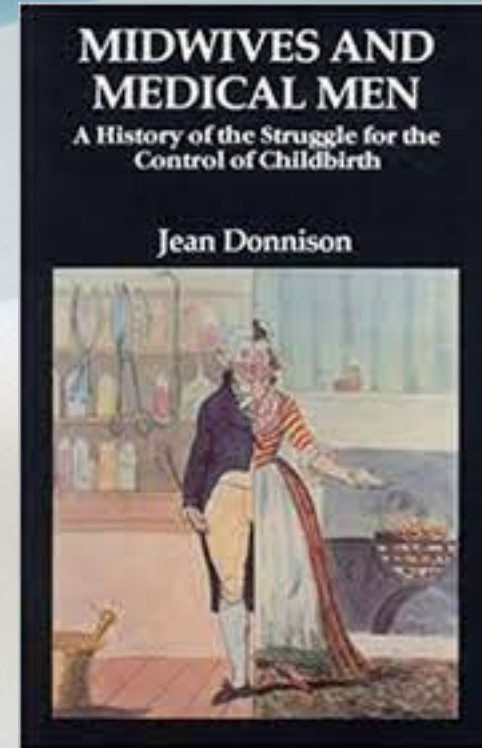
for nine years, working my way up from a PA to an executive producer to researcher to director on observational documentaries. I really enjoyed the human relationship side of things. When I went up a level I felt that the support network was no longer there and that I wasn't getting the same level of satisfaction from the work, plus there were more and more office politics." Other negatives included no let-up in anti-social hours, plus a London salary

that made supporting a family pretty tough (he has a two-year-old son). "I'd only really just begun my career so I thought that I had 30 years ahead of me. Did I really want to spend it in London - which would require a lot of energy? It's really a young person's industry." "I hadn't initially realised how practical making TV is and how practical I've become. Now I'm able to use my brain in a way that I hadn't been using it at the BBC. I do much more practical, tangible things

0.3 % of midwives in the UK and 0.6% of midwives globally identify as men
(NMC, 2019; Sannomiya et al., 2019)

0.4% of midwives in the UK do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth
(NMC, 2022)

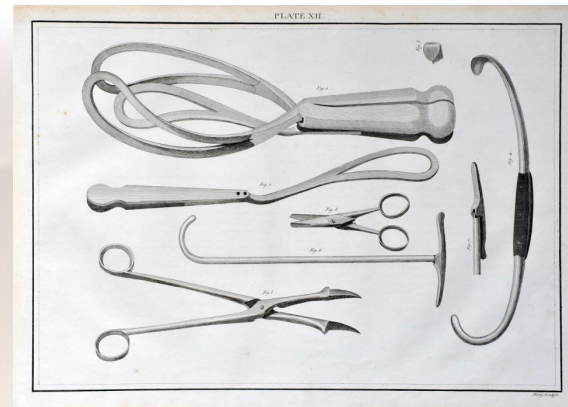
“Conflict Writing”



A Golden Age



Post Enlightenment



20th Century Professionalisation

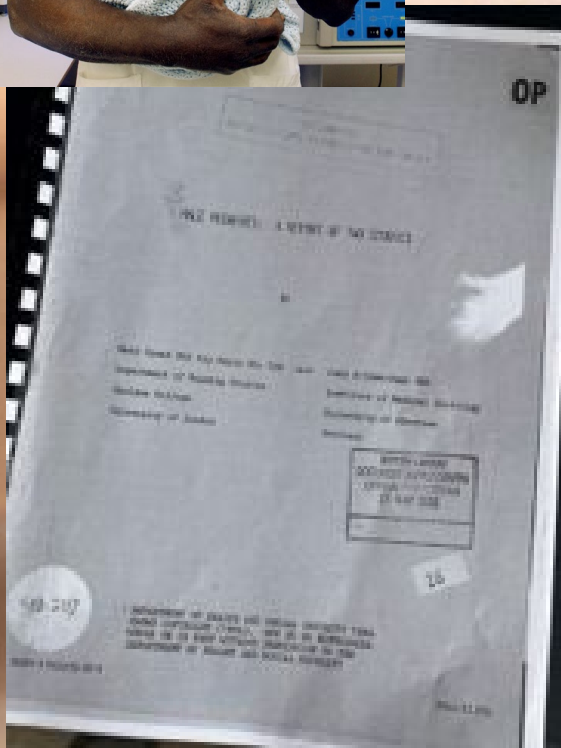




The "Male Midwife"

- ".... If male nurses are admitted to the profession, it will not be so much because they are wanted in it but because people can see no very good reason for keeping them out." (p.79)

- Acceptable?
- Necessary?
- Equal?





“Acceptable?”

Gender as essential

"The association between a woman and her midwife is more intimate than that between patient and doctor and at an emotional time it would not be difficult for the ministrations of the male midwife to arouse sexual anxieties in the husband..."

Intimate Care

- Predatory male
- Caring female
- Gender-derived stress



“Acceptable?”

Gender as social construct

Managing masculinities

- Islands of masculinity
- Superhero
- Professions as gender neutral

- "By not trying to disturb structures of gender normativity they are enacting a sense of entitled belonging that can be linked to masculine normativity"

(Herakova, 2012: 339)

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Phenomenology

“Ignored obviousness” of how we experience the world (Zahavi, 2019:67)

Intentionality: “The relationship between a person’s consciousness and the world”

Hermeneutics

Cannot divorce experience from socio/cultural contexts

Dasein – Thrown into the world and must decide how to be

Compelled to be “meaning making machines” (Zimmerman, 2015:30)

Idiography

“Detailed examination of a particular experience for a person” (Beck, 2021:93)

Allows for “complexity of human psychology” (Smith et al., 2022: 31)

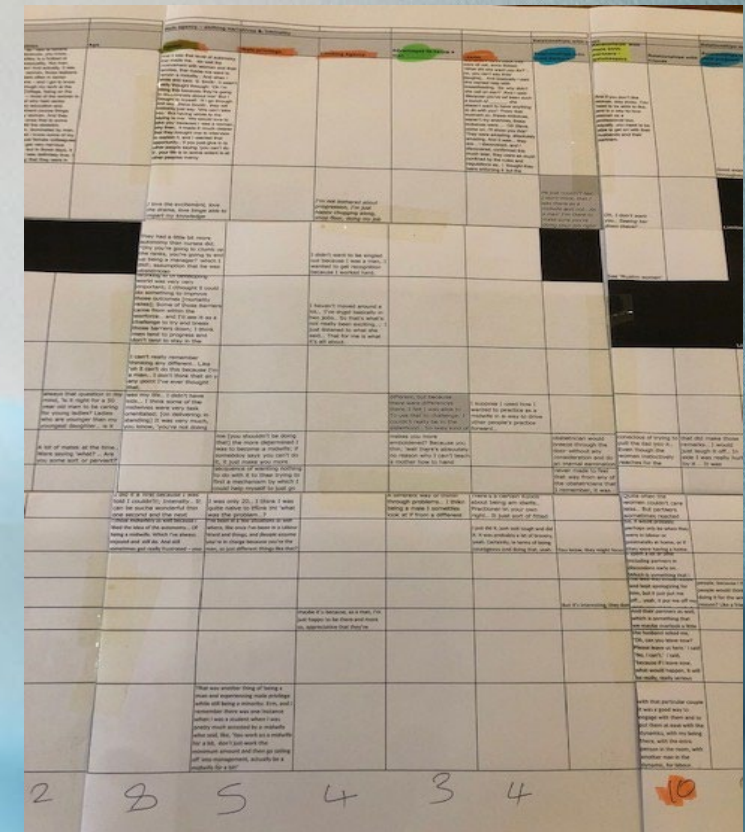
Analysis

- April 2020 to August 2021
- 15 Online interviews/participants
- Average duration one hour 28 minutes each

- Transcription
- Exploratory Noting
- Experiential statements
- Personal experiential themes
- Group experiential themes

statements

Experiential Statements	Interview Transcript	Exploratory Notes
Trojan Horse or Assimilator?	And I must say, probably in the first six months. I think, once the core staff got used to me, and they were used to my presence... And I suppose ... and I suppose like always, I'm a very easy-going person. I can get on with most people... And I think I just slowly worked my way in, and I suppose the best way I would describe it, erm, is that I became part of that community, you know? I was no longer the male student midwife. I was... They started to call me Dennis and I, I think it was just a matter of them adjusting to it as well, but ... it was about them getting used to it because, yes, I suppose at the time, it wasn't the done thing really, erm... For men to be midwives. There'd only recently been a change in the law and, a year before... Like I say, as a student nurse, a year before, all male nurses did not do gynae or maternity experience in my day, you know? We had to do mental health and, erm... other options. And it was only the EU directive that said that all adult nurses had to have this experience that kind of forced men into that environment, so it was still very new to them, erm... So, it would be interesting to see views of some of the guys that are in training now because I would hope that that would be very different because, yeah. I suppose 30	<p>Time limited – initial testing period of six months. Required acceptance/tolerance by key members of team (sisterhood?) Assigns him the role of being an unchallenging presence Acceptance by stealth – silent and patient. Another 'strategy', not a passive thing. Trojan horse?? Or assimilation?</p> <p>Just a verbal tick or appealing to me for validation of shared experience?</p> <p>Acceptance acknowledged by end of objectification and being individualized</p> <p>Disruptor – had to give them time to accommodate</p> <p>Fixing it within socio-economic-political context.</p>
Trojan Horse		Unwelcome visitors as a result of political changes (male? System)
Collective –		Expects that time and exposure to men in midwifery has changed the experience. 'Hope' – suggests he has not discussed this with anyone – why not? Lack of opportunity? Or...?
		Did not seek or relish the prospect of being a pioneer – thrust



1 - Minority Midwives: “Is it because I’m a man?”

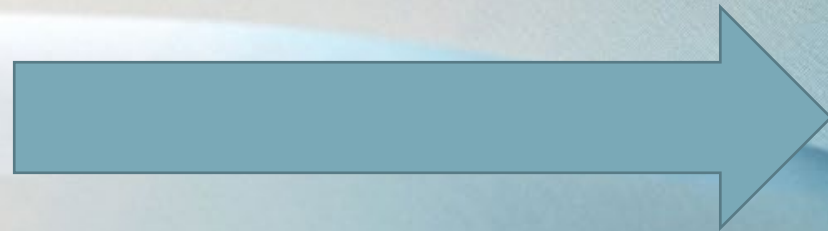
Making sense of experiences through the language of discrimination, equality, diversity and inclusion

2 – Gendered Midwives: “The right kind of man”

Exploring how their journey to becoming a midwife and how they “passed the test”; managing their gender to avoid posing an existential threat to the profession

3 – Sexualised Midwives: “That added level of differentness”

.....



Moments of disruption

“I remember working with the parentcraft sister...She'd been called up to a ward to a woman who was having difficulty breastfeeding. And [*she went*] behind the curtain, barely spoke to the woman, opened her nightie, grabbed her breast, grabbed the baby, put the two together and basically forced the baby to breastfeed... I thought “Oh my God, I can't possibly do this, because I can't possibly do that! What! I'd get run out of town! There's no way! So, if that's what's required, there's no...’ you know? So, it made me very acutely aware of my gender at that point. I thought, ‘Hold on a minute! There is clearly certain things that my female colleagues do... that there's absolutely no way that I can do!’”

“I remember very vividly... a woman was transitioning, you know, into more active labour, and was becoming really warm so had started [*removing clothes*] ... and just put her arms around me, completely naked, standing with her arms around me, her head buried into me, and her partner walks into the room and you think... you're looking at his face and you're trying to make that expression, that look, to say, ‘Do you know, this is nothing other than... I'm completely oblivious to the fact that your...’”

Boundaries

“... we opened the notes and it says, erm, that she'd had a traumatic episode of, erm, physically and sexually abusive behaviour. And I felt kind of sick. Because it's kind of like, the reason why she allowed me to examine her was I was a man, and she just associated men with abuse, and there was no need to struggle or fight, because you, you know... And I felt awful... And I suppose the thing I really struggled with was the fact that she had been abused made it really easy for me to examine her. And that made me feel quite sick... I almost felt like, well, like I'd abused her myself.”

“Without thinking I just said, “There's a hand here, if you need to squeeze it, you can squeeze me as hard as you can, you can't break me, I'm made of strong stuff!” ... And tried to just provide that reassurance, maybe, without taking into consideration erm... how that might make not only the woman feel but also maybe her partner”

The midwife he was working with cautioned him that;

“... in other people's minds there is a difference between a man offering a hand and a woman offering a hand.”

Reading the room

“There are probably very few moments when I wasn’t aware [*of my gender*] ... I would say that having that awareness was necessary because whoever you were working with or whoever you were caring for would be conscious that you were a man.”

“Each time I first encounter a woman I try to identify whether it’s going to be an issue or not... It come up with conversations with colleagues as well.”

“Not like the wince or anything but like... withdrawn and kind of facial expression they make”

“I just remember the looks in the rooms of service users, looking at the husband looking at the service user, and the service user looking at the husband.”

“They both looking at me as in ... as if they wanted to say something, and they didn’t know how to go about it.”

Doing it differently

“Certain midwives would just come into the room, and I would classify as assault a woman but just coming in and putting on a pair of gloves and sticking their fingers into the woman’s vagina without even gaining any form of consent... I think it’s about being able to explain why you need to examine them, what it is that you hope to achieve through the examination, the fact that the examination is going to be of an intimate nature and that you are going to have to undertake it in a way that they might find uncomfortable.”

“It’s almost like, you’re not asking permission.... It’s like explaining why you are there... almost saying, “Yeah, and by the way, I’ve got every right to be here!” Within what you are saying as well. Yeah.”

“When they come into the room it’s very important for me to shut the door and make sure that people feel secure, so they’re always close to the door and I’m away from it so they’re... if they needed to, they can escape.”

Highlighting or Minimising sexuality

“I think being a gay man helps. Because you are... women don’t find you so much of a threat.... I sometimes use it to my favour... I... camp it up... I alter my behaviour. I think if someone said “Ooh, you’ve got lovely Karl looking after you” ... they’re like, “Oh my god! Karl, oh my God, a man, a man, a man!” And then I walk in, like, “Hiya!” ... I think instantly they’re like, “Oh phew! He’s gay!” Which is terrible but that’s how I imagine the women being.”

- **“... How I usually introduce myself, I say, you know, “I’m Joseph, I’m the midwife that’s running the shift today, erm, don’t you worry, ‘cos you’ll never see... I promise you’ll never see me again; do you mind if I have a look at what’s going on down below? Because I believe there a bit of a problem.” I try to minimise my involvement.”**

“Have you got children?” And I would say, “Yes!” [laughs]. I don’t remember a situation where it’s gone further. Because in all fairness, I think as soon as you say you’re married with children they make the assumption that you’re married to a female, to a woman.”

Rejection

“And I can honestly say, and I don’t know how many people you’re going to interview can say this, but I’ve never had a refusal for care in my career!”

“It’s happened like plenty of times over my course.... It made me feel very othered and yeah, like I was less of a midwife. Yeah, not pleasant.”

- “It’s hard to describe... I’m not embarrassed... It’s not embarrassment, because I don’t feel embarrassed, it’s their choice... it’s like awkward, cringey, I want to say like cringey, I’m not cringed by it... no maybe it is embarrassment? I’m not embarrassed, I’m not... I don’t... That’s really... I dunno, that’s a difficult... I’m not like gutted... And partly sometimes it might be like annoyance... I don’t know, that’s ... difficult actually.”

Rejection

“I realise this woman, actually, she’s about to deliver. And the husband asked me, “Oh, can you leave now? Please leave us here.” I said, “No, I can’t.” I said, “Because if I leave now, what would happen, it will be really, really serious because your wife would deliver without any... any health professional, and I don’t want that to happen.” And then he walked out shouting, called for other people to come in, women to come in, and nobody was answering. And then he came back. He said, “Can you leave please?” I said, “Did you find someone?” He said, “No, but I want you to leave. I don’t want a man to deliver my baby.” And I said to him, “I will only leave her if someone else comes. But there’s no one here, I cannot leave this woman.”....The woman was struggling. I can see that the wife wanted to say yes, but it was a bit of difficulty, right? It just was difficult because if a husband said no and then she said yes, it will be a problem between them and I can see that she really wanted... she was looking at me like begging with the eye contact that, “Please see me, don’t leave me!” She was so scared.

“She was obviously in very advanced labour, very distressed, couldn’t speak a word of English... And her partner was from the same country... Romania... he said, “Oh yeah, yeah, what are you doing?” And I said, “We need to see what the baby is doing, what’s happening... we could do with a... vaginal examination.” And she’s looking at me there like she’s horrified, I don’t know what had gone on, but he said, “Just do it! I give you permission...” I said, “No, no!” I refused to do it.”

Theory of “Compulsory heterosexuality”

(Rich, 2004)

- NOT heterosexual sexuality
- Heterosexuality as structural rather than individual “essence”
- Paradigmatic “for considering how sexuality is embedded in non-sexual aspects of social life” (Jackson & Scott, 2010:5)

- Naturalization of heterosexuality and masculine sexual agency (Butler, 1990:58)
- An essentially transgressive act
- Requires work to disentangle threat of predation from intimate care
- “Under conditions of compulsory heterosexuality, the individual never eludes gender” (Seidman, 2009:21)

“Mansplaining” or Who gets to talk about gender???

Autoethnographic Gems

- “Not an apology, not a manifesto”
- “No, it’s not something I’ve noticed”
- “Mansplaining”

- Epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007)
- Testimonial injustice (Dular, 2021)
- Epistemic authority (Joyce et al., 2021)
- “Epistemic entitlement” (Manne, 2020)

Men not talking about gender makes gender the exclusive domain of women to talk about....

What is the original contribution of this work?

- Make the experiences of men who are midwives most visible
- Theoretical generalizability to other professional contexts
- Praxis: Practical application of theory

- Contribution to gender studies scholarship
- Novel application of triple hermeneutic
- To be continued....

“Why are you here?”  **“Should I be here?”**

Essential?

- Strategic essentialism
- Biological and psychological determinism
- A stable and fixed point of view which is easily understandable
- (i.e. “Acceptable”)

Or Socially Constructed?

- Does this resolve the “issue”?
- (i.e. “Necessary” & “Equal”)

ANY?
QUESTIONS

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