
Women's homebirth memories:

a decision with a lasting effect? (Part 3)

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Summary

25 women who had had a homebirth between 3 and 5 years ago were interviewed about the longer term effects of their choice to have their baby at home. The women described the impact of the birth in terms of their perception of themselves as a woman, their reinterpretation of past negative events such as previous births and their understanding of subsequent experiences such as relationships with others and future decisions about birth.
Introduction

'Changing Childbirth' (Department of Health, 1993) stated that 'professionals cannot quantify the enriching experience which some women feel when they have their baby in a place of their choice' (Department of Health, 1993, p. 23). Over recent years there has been an increasing interest in the possible longer term effects of having a baby. Simkin (1992) examined women's long term memories of their birth experiences and concluded that women's memories are strikingly vivid. In her review for the National Childbirth Trust, Moorehead (1996) emphasised the emotional content of birth and introduces the book with the statement 'childbirth isn't just something that women go through. Its something that changes them as individuals, something that shows them their vulnerability and their strength, something that teaches them about themselves' thus emphasising birth as having an impact beyond the confines of the birth itself. However, homebirths remain an infrequent occurrence and little research to date has specifically explored the longer term effects of having a baby at home.

This paper is the third in a series examining the homebirth experience (Ogden et al 1996a; 1996b). This component of the study aimed to explore women's beliefs about the longer term impact of choosing to have their baby at home.

Methodology

Details of the method can be seen the earlier paper (Ogden et al, 1996a). The component of the interview concerned with the longer term effects of the homebirth consisted of the following open ended question:

'Can you tell me what effect you feel the birth has had on your life'.
Results

When asked about the consequences of having a homebirth the women initially considered its
general impact:

'I think it is one of the nicest things that ever happened to me.... it is a nice experience that
you can remember for the rest of your life'

Several women were less sure about the longer term impact:

'I'm really glad that I had wonderful birth experiences. In the end you have got your children
and you love them to bits and I suppose any bad birth experiences fade into the distance, but
it is lovely that my children had a really beautiful start in life. Whether that has any long term
effect I don't know'.

The women also described the extent to which they talked about the birth subsequently.
Some described how it had become a common topic of conversation:

'it becomes quite a big thing in your life ....everyone is always asking you ... how did it go,
and how long were you in labour, and you sort of tell the story over and over again'

For one woman who had had a difficult experience, she felt that she didn't want to deter
others:

'If anybody asked me about homebirths I never really told them the story of Rosie if they were
considering having a baby at home ..... I didn't tell friends very much'.

The women also described ways of maintaining the memory of the birth. A couple of women had made videos of the birth, many women had had photographs taken and several women described the value of writing things down.

'you could read it back, which I think is the nicest thing out of all because you forget things and you say ;Oh I never said that' ... you have got a record of it and I think it is a nice thing to pass on to your children...... I think I would give it to my kids and say this was the frame of mind I was in on the day you were born'

In particular, the women described the impact of their homebirth in terms of the following factors:

1/ Perceptions of self as a woman.

The women described the impact of the homebirth in terms of their physical state:

'I did it with support but not you know great intrusive high tech things to help me so I felt, I suppose ...... it made me feel complete as a woman'.

'I would say I felt very exhilarated by it all really. It was so nice to know my body worked properly and I had managed to do that'

One woman who had difficult births in the past said:
'I felt very confident in my body as a mother....It sounds strange ... but the way the birth went, I think previously I'd thought from the hospital managed birth as if it had all been taken away from me ....but the second birth really put that right for me, really gave me the confidence that, oh yes, I do function all right really'.

The women also described the impact in terms of changes in their emotional state.

'it made us feel more confident, peaceful and able to do things I definitely do feel a lot more comfortable with myself...... so I think it has made me feel, I am definitely ..not so scared of life'

'being aware that I was in control just made me very capable with three small children ....It just made me feel that if I could do that and be in control and have a baby with no problems basically I could do anything. That is how it left me feeling.

One woman discussed the possible relationship between homebirths and post natal depression:

'I never had any slight bit of post natal depression who knows whether that is my personality, what happened to me or whether it is connected, but I have a strong feeling that having had such a good birth experience and being at home and the breast feeding went well, could be connected'

2. Previous experiences.

The women also described the impact of the homebirth in terms of the way they felt about
experiences prior to the birth.

In terms of previous births, one woman who had two difficult births before said:

'I didn't get any stitches and I wasn't induced and I didn't have a Caesarean or anything like that..... I felt, yes. I had achieved something really good that birth doesn't have to be horrible'.

Another woman who had had one difficult birth said:

'The first time I had a child I really felt I needed to talk about it and if anybody was talking about pregnancy or birth I had to get in with my little comments. But now I don't. It's as if having Gregory was like a healing for what happened the first time'

In terms of how they identified with their surroundings at the time of the birth:

'Its nice to think that my child was born in this room rather than some far away hospital'

'It was a very positive experience and particularly for this house, because actually a few years earlier I nursed my father here while he died, he actually died here while he was at home and it felt good to have a sort of counterbalancing experience for this house - sort of one out and one in'.

3. Future experiences.
The women also described their homebirth in light of subsequent experiences.
For many women their experiences had encouraged them to have other homebirths:

'If I was to have another child I would still have it at home'

'After my second child I was very negative but Simon being such a nice calm experience..... If I was to get pregnant this would make me do it again'

One women said that her experiences had resulted in her having more children:

'One of the jokes I have made which may have some truth in it is that I may not have ended up with three if it hadn't been so good. That is a pretty lasting implication'

However, one woman who had had a difficult birth said:

'It did make me nervous about having Amy. I decided that I would have Amy in hospital'

The women also described the impact on their relationships with the child who had been born at home:

'The relationship with your child starts right at the beginning, the birth and then the breast feeding. My bond was there instantly'

and with their other children:

'We are lucky enough to have it on video and the children love to see it so we talk about it and discuss it'
In particular, some women discussed how the birth may have influenced the child's behaviour.

'I felt it made all the difference, you know, being at home, being able to walk around in my own living room ....I was thinking it made a difference to them as well. I don't know maybe it was just me and that's the way they are.... the way they are calm and they were really calm.....The mother and child are relaxed, the baby is happy and not so traumatised'

'its quite interesting because his birth was probably rather like his personality because he is a very fast and furious and energetic little boy'

The women also described the effect of the homebirth on their future relationships with their children:

'It has certainly given me positive experiences to look back on and .... no fears to pass on to my children about the whole event'

'maybe if I could sort of you know encourage my own children if they want to have theirs at home ... to see what a fulfilling experience it is'.

Many women described the consequences of the homebirth in terms of their relationships with their mothers.

For many, it had brought them closer to their mother:

'It's levelled us quite a bit because we are both women who have given birth to children. We are both mothers and we have both got our family responsibilities and I am no longer her little
'I think that was nice for her to see a really normal experience of birth and to be part of it in some way'

However, for some it had highlighted some of the problems with this relationship:
'I couldn’t have spoken to my mother about it she just can’t cope with anything like that ... there wasn’t anybody that I felt that, that had the right to know everything I felt, you know, so I didn’t discuss it an awful lot.'

And at times the homebirth was seen as a way to move on from a problematic relationship with their mother:
'I haven’t got a very good relationship with my mother and particularly for me it has been very positive in a way to break the shackles of that kind of relationship'

The women also described the effect of the homebirth on their relationships with other women. In the main the women described the network of women friends which had resulted from the homebirth experience:
'they are all personal friends now, but at the same time they were just all in the same boat at the same time and this time I had a really good network'
'the network of women friends is really supportive in lots of practical ways ...... I think it is a different relationship that you have with women friends who share that experience with you'.
The women also described the homebirth in terms of its influence on their environment.

'where I had Matthew has become Matthew's bedroom, we were decorating the bedroom differently and he is really really chuffed and now after, because he was born in that room and now he's back in that room I think he was pleased, I think it makes more sense to him'

Discussion

The women initially described the impact of the birth in terms of the extent to which they had talked about it and debated whether it had had a longer term effect. However, they then progressed to explain such effects. In particular, they described the impact of their homebirth in terms of its effect on their feelings about themselves as women and indicated that their ability to have a baby at home had made them feel more confident about themselves and subsequently better equipped to deal with their children. Further, they described feeling reassured that their bodies functioned properly.

The women also described the impact of the homebirth in terms of their reappraisal of past events and their interpretation of future ones. The homebirth appeared to help some women put negative past events such as death and difficult births into a more positive framework. Further, the homebirth appeared to have a lasting positive influence on their interpretation of future relationships with a range of individuals.

The results therefore point to an impact of choosing to have a baby at home which is prolonged beyond the actual birth itself. As the women themselves noted, it is unclear whether these positive consequences are the results of having a child per se, however, the
women in the present study described the consequences as a result of the factors associated with being in their own home. Moorehead argues that birth changes how women feel about themselves (1996). Further, 'Changing Childbirth' stresses that childbirth is an enriching experience. The results from the present study support these suggestions. However, the results also indicate that having a baby at home may make a rewarding experience into an event which not only changes the individual but colours the way they understand both their past and future lives.

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References


Ogden, J., Shaw, A., and Zander, L. (1996b) Deciding to have a home birth: women's memories of help and hindrances 3-5 years on. Submitted for publication.