AIMS For a better birth...

Sharing is Caring - and that goes for maternity research too! Reflections on a public engagement event and why we need more of this

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By Georgia Clancy

For me, researching maternity and childbirth experiences is fascinating because it represents an event in the lives of women when different perspectives and approaches converge and tensions can arise as important negotiations take place. Ideas about pregnancy, birth and motherhood affect most women's lives, whether they have children or not, and motherhood is often wrapped up with morality; the need to do the 'right' and 'proper' thing, in order to confirm not only your status as a 'good' mother, but by extension a 'good' woman. This can be identified in the sort of questions that we hear often, such as:

When are you going to have a(nother) baby? – Isn't that too old, or too young?

Will it be at home or a labour ward?

Breastfeed or bottle-feed?

Will you return to work or be a stay-at-home mum?

These are complex decisions, and what might be right for one person might be wrong for someone else. That can make being on the receiving end of someone's judgement inevitable.

I spent four years researching women's childbirth choices, namely how and where they gave birth, in light

of the latest NHS England maternity care policy, Better Births (2016). I'd read how choice was promised to women in the predecessors of Better Births - Changing Childbirth (1993) and Maternity Matters (2007). I'd also read studies and articles that followed those policies, reporting that women's childbirth choices were going unfulfilled. I wanted to understand why there was a continuing disparity between the births women wanted and the births they actually had, necessitating the repetition of the same aim - to improve women's available choice in birth - across three national maternity care policies spanning 23 years. Unsurprisingly, the answers I found were complicated and included challenges such as limited resources, the 'increasing complexity' of birth, workplace/professional culture, and risk management by both women and practitioners.

I am now working to share the findings of my research with those who are most affected by, and invested in, the improvement of maternity care: maternity service users, families, practitioners, maternity charities and organisations, and policymakers. One of the ways that I did this recently was with an online event that took place as part of the ESRC's (Economic and Social Research Council's) 2021 Festival of Social Science. This is a festival specifically designed to engage the public in social science research. The event was called, 'Sharing childbirth experiences: choices, challenges and conversation'[1]. Lasting just 1-hour, my event started with a performance of a woman's childbirth story, based on what I heard during my research. Not knowing who would be in the audience, I wanted to bring to life some of the issues that affect choice during pregnancy and childbirth. The performance then acted as a springboard for a discussion with a panel of experts made up of Nadia Higson (AIMS), Alicia Burnett (midwife) and Anna Madeley (midwife, PhD student and AIMS volunteer). We had lots of great comments and questions from the audience, which steered our conversation. We talked about the complexity of choice in childbirth, how choice is represented in the NICE guidelines, obstetric violence, home birth, fear and risk in birth, and the importance of antenatal education, postnatal care and continuity of carer. The event was recorded and is available online.

So why hold public engagement events like this? Aside from the fact that public engagement is increasingly required of higher education institutions, it can also help make research more accessible, transparent and relevant. By engaging the public, researchers learn to become more accountable to the public about how research funding is being used. Explaining what researchers are doing and why is a key part of conducting ethical research and can help to build public trust, demonstrate how the research is benefiting society, and create a conversation that allows research to be more responsive to what the public needs. Public engagement doesn't need to be reserved for sharing findings, of course, but can help to shape all stages of the research process. With this particular event, I aimed to raise awareness amongst maternity service users about the complex issues involved in maternity care provision in England today and contribute to the public and professional debates surrounding them.

One thing that strikes me whenever I talk to people about my research is their willingness to share their own experiences. From the women who participated in my PhD study, to those who attended the *Sharing childbirth experiences* event, to strangers who ask what I do for a living and immediately recount their birth story to me, the goodwill extended to me as I research this topic is clear. It is an honour and a privilege to be trusted with these stories, and the responsibility to try and do something positive with

them is one that I take seriously. I think women's willingness to tell their birth stories is often altruistic, they hope that by sharing *their* experience *someone else's* experience might be better. But more than that, I often get the sense that many women are looking for an opportunity to talk about their maternity experiences, still trying to unpack what happened to them, perhaps welcoming the opportunity because they had never really had the encouragement or time to reflect on it previously.

With this in mind, and to support AIMS' mission, I hope to organise more events like this in the future. In collaboration with AIMS, these events would be an opportunity to create and strengthen the dialogue between researchers, those with lived experience of pregnancy and birth, practitioners, and the AIMS team, to share and learn from one another, as well as to discuss some of the key issues facing maternity care today. Watch this space!

Author bio: Georgia Clancy is a research fellow at the University of Warwick. Her research explores women's childbirth preferences, decisions and outcomes in light of NHS England's Better Births policy. Georgia is also a member of the AIMS Campaigns Team.

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[1] Sharing childbirth experiences: choices, challenges and conversation
www.youtube.com/watch?v=CbaUWozxk-I