

Lessons learnt from 'real world' research

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This special edition of *Evidence Based Midwifery* (EBM) provides a unique collection of papers illustrating the lessons learnt by midwife researchers 'doing research' in the real world where life is complex and human needs are palpable. The insights shared demonstrate what research is all about – challenges to be faced, obstacles to overcome, the sweet fruit of perseverance and the invaluable support from good supervisors.

A common theme addressed in the papers by Chotiga et al (2010) and Kerrigan and Houghton (2010) is one of accessing the sample population and both papers offer a profound and salutary message: 'Do not underestimate the complexities and sensitivities of research that involves human beings... Communication across different cultures, in different languages with multiple interpreters requires personal commitment, time, dedication and perseverance.' In addition, Chotiga et al (2010) has a novel presentation style that offers a unique frame of reference, permitting the reader access to the mindset of the research supervisor in her role as teacher, leader, expert and carer.

The inarguable value of discussion and communication between researchers coming from different research paradigms is another insight shared with us by Stenhouse and Letherby (2010). One major reflection in this paper is the concluding comment in which the authors seem to me to be alluding to the potential loss of professional and personal self in pursuit of a shared multidisciplinary team view in which 'we' becomes symbolic of a culmination of hidden layers of 'negotiation, compromise and accommodation' (Stenhouse and Letherby, 2010). The lasting effect of this reflection may pierce the hearts and minds of those who truly strive to reduce the tokenism of multidisciplinary and team-work in order to achieve the desired and hard-to-reach 'shared but collaborative voice' (Stenhouse and Letherby, 2010).

Marshall et al (2010) illustrate the dimensions and properties of 'reflexivity' in the context of undertaking ethnographic research to explore issues of consent to intrapartum procedures. It facilitates a deeper understanding of the processes involved in the real world of field research, where the application of rigour with regard to reflexivity is complex and challenging. It offers an invaluable contribution to our knowledge about process and application of research methodology in clinical practice.

van Teijlingen et al (2010) share lessons learnt from undertaking research in developing countries within Asia and Africa, where understanding the infrastructure, culture and Hawthorne effect of the research process itself cannot be underestimated. In their concluding paragraph they offer much advice, but the last sentence echoes loudly of learned wisdom: '...reflect on your experience of doing research and learn from your own mistakes and those of others' (van Teijlingen et al, 2010).

The reflection by Spence (2010) is one of those rare papers that captures the imagination and conjures images of a secret world lost and found in which the imagination plays havoc with historical information revealed, contextualised and revitalised to produce contemporaneous and synthesised data for

multiple usage. The author appeared to revel in her role as field detective and used all means available to access the 50-year-old patient records and live survivors who were born 'small for gestational age' in Belfast during the 1950s (Spence, 2010).

Perseverance is a highly desirable trait in any researcher and the paper by Lagan (2010) demonstrates a range of challenges faced by a researcher undertaking novel technological research that posed definitive ethical, technical and methodological issues. Lessons learnt and motivations to persevere are key determinants of the overall experience.

On reflection of the overall contribution to midwifery knowledge, it is worth noting some important points: accessing vulnerable groups for what are often researcher-led outcomes is always going to be an ethically difficult decision, but the results often provide new knowledge or understanding that is meritorious in itself. The cultural and sociopolitical aspects experienced in the research field are contextually binding and cannot be detached from the lifeworld of the participants. Understanding the layers of characteristics in a given sample cannot be described without peeling back the cover and exposing the underlying vulnerability of the people concerned and this is evidenced in several of the papers presented. In essence, protecting the safety, wellbeing and identity of vulnerable participants is a major challenge for the researcher and the supervisor. No amount of forward planning or research training can prepare the researcher for the messiness of real life, in which multiple factors merge and mesh to seal the fate of individuals.

In conclusion, this special edition of *EBM* offers a wealth of knowledge gained by the researcher in the field of real world research where access, communication, culture, history and ethics are plaited to provide an elaborate and intricate understanding of the research process in action.

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