
Article

Dancing with the Wind: A Methodological Approach to Researching Women's Spirituality around Menstruation and Birth

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Abstract

Research into spirituality is by definition problematic. In an evidence-based culture, how is a concept like spirituality defined and measured? Through her doctoral dissertation, the author seeks to illuminate dimensions of female spirituality connected with the processes of menstruation and birth. In Western industrialized culture, these processes are regarded as medical concerns. Reframing the spiritual significance of menses, the author explores the links between attitudes toward menstruation and spirituality, and women's birth experiences. The lack of research and literature about the spirituality of menstruation, or the spiritual care of the birthing woman denotes a vacuum in both theory and practice. The author presents her methodological approach to resolving the dilemma of how to research the elusive concept of female spirituality—an endeavor akin to attempting to lasso the wind! Through a combination of autoethnography, focus groups, and in-depth interviews, she takes up the challenge of expanding the qualitative research frontier.

Keywords: spirituality, menstruation, birth, feminist, qualitative, research, methodology, autoethnography, focus groups, interviews

If research on spirituality is still in an infantile stage, then it follows that research on spirituality and birth is in the embryonic stage.—Carmen Linhares, 2005, p. 15

Cross-culturally and throughout history, pregnancy and childbirth have been perceived as spiritual events because of the miraculous processes involved (Linhares, 2005). However, a perusal of the health care literature reveals a notable lack of research related to the spiritual care and spirituality of the pregnant and birthing woman (Hall, 2001). This vacuum reflects the institutionalized partition of body and spirit characteristic of Western biomedicine (Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002). Although obstetrics does not regard spirituality as its remit (Murphy-Lawless, 1998), for many couples the birth of their babies is a deeply spiritual event.

The obstetric framework of meaning around birth, and women's experiences and understandings, are often contradictory (Oakley, 2005). Obstetric discourse constructs birth as high risk, requiring specialist medical care and technological expertise for all women.¹ However, the recent report into birthing in Queensland (Hirst, 2005) identified an alternative discourse which regards birth as a healthy physiological process in which the mother's emotional and spiritual needs are significant in securing optimal outcomes. Because discourse has the power to shape experience (Murphy-Lawless, 1988), a fear-based, risk management approach has the potential to divest the moment of birth of its spirituality, as well as producing a noxious effect (Buckley, 2003). Because birth is so commonly experienced as a techno-medical event, no one guesses that the depression and spiritual distress that often follow are reflective of a system (and a discourse) at odds with women's physiology and needs.

Similarly, menstruation in Western industrialized culture is surrounded by the discourse of an embarrassing liability, requiring medical surveillance and control (Murphy-Lawless, 1988). Our menstrual rhythms are devalued as bodily changes without meaning or, worse, are associated with pathology, shame, inferiority, and the profane. (Koutroulis, 2001; Lee, 2002; McKeever, 1985). Yet other cultural traditions, like that of the Navajo Nation, have celebrated and revered menstruation as a time of heightened spirituality that benefits the whole community (Rutter, 1993). In the 1970s Shuttle and Redgrove's (1978) prophetic voices began moving in this direction, presaging Grahn's (1993) groundbreaking work that revisioned our cultural approach by postulating the particularities of menstruation as the source of our human uniqueness. Expanding on this metaformic theory, Grenn (2006) developed her unique theology based on the premise that menstrual blood is women's covenantal relationship with Deity, a universal covenant open to all women.

What is spirituality?

There are endless definitions of spirituality, and inconsistencies in defining the concept have impeded progress on the topic (Dyson, Cobb, & Forman, 1997). To subvert this double bind, I have found a useful way of understanding the phenomenon by making clear a basic ontological assumption: namely, that spirituality is implicit in our humanity.

Although this might seem a bold assertion, it is not unfounded if we turn our gaze for a moment to a seemingly unrelated discipline: archaeology. From archaeological digs, a wealth of evidence dating back to the dawn of our evolution as a species suggests an

experience of the sacred (Ries, 1993). Ries commented, “As more discoveries have come to light there has been an increase in the evidence derived from symbols and rites, the cumulative weight of which suggests that there was indeed an experience, albeit rudimentary, of the sacred” (p. 28). I think we can reasonably conclude from these findings that spirituality is part of our evolutionary endowment.²

In the research context, the notion of the research subject as a “psychosocial” entity is an established assumption (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). This description can be usefully expanded to incorporate spirituality as well. In the words of Burkhardt and Nagai-Jacobson (2002), “By virtue of being human, all persons, at all ages, in all cultures, whether or not they are religious, are bio-psycho-social-spiritual beings” (p. 8). This approach undercuts Western dualisms related to notions of spirituality, providing a rich, multifaceted definition of the human subject, including the researcher, for the research context.

Researching spirituality

Research into spirituality poses problems, because, like the wind, it is not a phenomenon that lends itself to “imposed boundaries, conceptual or otherwise” (Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002, p. 18). It is also deeply personal and individual. Yet during my research, I have encountered many women and midwives for whom the experience of spirituality associated with menstruation and birth is a vibrant and manifestly obvious fact.

Although spirituality might defy conceptual and definition boundaries, this does not mean that the topic is unresearchable. It means, rather, that we need to broaden our horizons about what constitutes research and, particularly, how notions of validity and evidence are determined. In autoethnography, for instance, where the personal intersects with the social and cultural, validity is determined by qualities like verisimilitude: that something rings true, and other people can identify with the phenomenon. As Ellis and Bochner (2000) commented, “You might also judge validity by whether it helps readers communicate with others different from themselves, or offers a way to improve the lives of participants and readers or even your own” (p. 751).

As Morse (2006b) has noted, standards for validity and evidence in medical research were initially established to determine efficacy in pharmaceutical trials. This quantitative benchmark would seem an irrelevant pursuit for a qualitative inquiry concerned with exploration and meaning making. Qualitative research offers a valuable contribution to humanizing health care by providing the personal perspective not available from quantitative methods. For example, in her presentation on a qualitative study on the use of side rails on hospital beds for aged patients, Morse (2006a) argued that the evidence of one stumble on one video is compelling enough to modify practice.

Context

Through my doctoral topic—“reframing female biology as sacred ground and a site of liberation: A study of women’s bio-spiritual experiences of menstruation and birth”—I

seek a cultural reform of attitudes toward female body processes and understandings of spirituality. I began this pursuit from a critical feminist perspective, recognizing the power imbalances, patriarchal controls, and structural inequities that work to oppress women (Maynard & Purvis, 1994), even in their intimate body experiences. However, as my title describes, there is a strong emancipatory focus. Framing the topic of menstruation and birthing as aspects of women's spirituality has itself served an emancipatory function, exploding the taboo that the subject matter is somehow unsavory or unspeakable.

Methodological considerations

My understanding of method includes both the conception of a particular research project and the methods engaged to answer the research question (Klein, 1994). As a qualitative study, my topic had its genesis in my personal and professional experience as a women's health educator/counselor over the past decade. Frequently in the course of my work, I have been touched by the numinous power of the everyday miracles of pregnancy and birth. As a mother, I have experienced these phenomena. I have also shared clients' anguish at the constraints and dissonances of being female in a world that privileges maleness and is often blind to that numinousness.

As I inquired more deeply into these uniquely female experiences and explored their underlying social and cultural contexts, my research question, then, became How are women's experiences of menstruation, birth, and spirituality inscribed with meaning, and how does this shape and influence those experiences?

Ethics

As I broached this very personal topic, my professional work heightened my awareness of the need for great sensitivity and care, especially where there was a history of birth trauma or complications, reproductive losses, postnatal depression, sexual abuse, or experiences of humiliation and shame related to menstruation. I was keenly aware not only of the possibility of distressing memories' being evoked but of each woman's sacred territory in that vulnerability. Underpinning my approach was a genuine ethic of care and concern, and a commitment to be respectfully and compassionately present to my respondents as they explored their inner worlds. I also regarded the ethics and confidentiality requirements incumbent on my professional practice as a women's health counselor as applicable to this research, providing participants with three referral options for follow-up support if needed.

Methods

Researching the elusive concept of female spirituality is like trying to lasso the wind!³ Although you cannot tack it down, you can still ride the wind, as hang gliders and windsurfers well know. In dancing with the dilemma of how to engage with the phenomenon, I eventually settled on three different forms of data gathering: (a) focus groups, (b) in-depth interviews, and (c) autoethnography.⁴ My reasoning was that these

three approaches would provide three different testimonies to the power of that spirituality. Enacting and documenting each method would yield evidence of its existence, in the same way that a video of hang gliding or a windsurfing gives testimony to the existence of the wind!

My existing networks made recruitment of participants relatively easy. Through my professional work, I had made contact with groups like pre- and postnatal yoga, the active birth movement, healing birth workshops, midwives at both public and private hospitals, and other women's services. Once word about my study began to circulate, I was approached by one of these groups with the suggestion of doing a focus group with the staff, to which I responded enthusiastically. I also visited all the local hospitals speaking with the midwives about my research and posting an invitation to participate on their notice boards. I then began sending out "invitations to participate" by e-mail and found no shortage of interested women.

Focus groups—or women's circles

Focus groups are a valuable method for exploring the construction and negotiation of meanings (Wilkinson, 2004, as cited in Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004), perfect for an initial foray into the terrain of my research question, or so I thought! Initially regarded as precursors to the main research (interviews), the groups would heighten my sensitivity, expand my knowledge about "how participants talk the phenomenon of interest" (Steward & Shamdasani, 1990, p. 15), and assist in the development of the interview schedule (Morgan, 1988).

As it turned out, however, the focus groups far exceeded my initial expectations and unexpectedly overtook the interviews in becoming the primary (or at least equivalent) research method. Initially, I conducted four groups with a cross-section of women: a consumer lobby group, staff from a women's service, a gathering of midwives, and a group of student midwives. After some preliminary analysis, however, I began to realize that the group forum was an incredibly rich source of data. Although groups were unruly at times, the interactive process enabled a deeper penetration of the topic, "revealing dimensions of understanding that often remain untapped by the more conventional one-to-one interview or questionnaire" (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 109).

As I was questioning the primacy of the interview, a second synchronous event occurred. My first interview respondent suggested several friends who might be interested in participating in my study, so I sent her a copy of my "invitation to participate" and asked her to forward it to her friends. The invitation took off like a grass fire! Those friends e-mailed it to their networks, three posting it on Internet forums. Over the next 2 weeks, I received more than 30 e-mails from passionate women keen to participate in my research!

The extent and enthusiasm of this response was, in itself, validating. My topic clearly resonated with many other women. Moreover, as I began to engage with these women, I realized I had tumbled into a vigorous and robust "herstory," a female discourse on

menstruation, birthing, and spirituality.⁵ Because of the numbers, however, I was then confronted with the dilemma of how to honor and take up that valuable response. Most of the women lived in southeast Queensland, whereas I lived hundreds of miles away in the far north (Townsville). As it was not feasible to conduct so many interviews, I decided to facilitate more focus groups.

In the literature, a focus group is described as having between 6 and 12 participants (Morgan, 1988). Five of my groups had between 6 and 11 participants. However, two groups were small, intimate gatherings of 3 women, and the final one was a meeting with 2 homebirth midwives. These last groups were not originally intended to be so small; it was just how things turned out on the day because of child care, sick children, other family concerns, and so on. However, these small groups, because of their intimacy and depth, offered a meaningful contrast to the greater breadth provided by more participants. Strictly speaking, they are not focus groups. Perhaps “women’s circles” is a more apt description.

Kitzinger has described the focus group as a potentially liminal space, which enables the discussion of taboo subjects by breaking the ice and giving permission for people to comment (Kitzinger & Farquhar, 1999). This was certainly my experience. At times, however, the liminal space became more than just silence breaking. Through the interactive process, some groups also became occasions of liberation that were empowering for many respondents:

Sally: I’ve really enjoyed it. Its been special and good for people to talk about it because I don’t think we do talk about it. I feel empowered too.

Sue: I’m feeling inspired! . . . this has really helped me get inside, to get back to my roots.

Some respondents said that having the focus group was one way of enacting that cultural reform:

Nicole: Just going back to what you were saying earlier about how do you change things? I think part of the problem is that a lot of women don’t get an opportunity to talk about these things and we just never go there. And I think its really beneficial to be able to be open like this in a group.

Researcher: So this is one way of being able to make that change?

Nicole: Absolutely! I think so.

I found these focus groups an extraordinarily rich source of data collection ideally suited to feminist research. They not only generated change but, at times, became deeply spiritual encounters, nourishing for respondents and researcher alike. At the end of many groups, there was an expressed wish that we could do this again, which I felt reflected our cultural vacuum and the deep hunger in women around their female spirituality.

In-depth interviews—or sacred conversations

Oakley (2005) made the point that the goal of the interview is best served by a nonhierarchical relationship between respondent and interviewer, with the interviewer prepared to invest her personal identity in the encounter. As this topic was a personal passion for me, I could not do otherwise. I also sought to incorporate Devault's (2004) "woman-woman listening," that is, "listening around and beyond words" to recover experiences that "do not fit" (p. 233) in conventional language.

As the number of focus groups increased, I made a corresponding reduction in the interviews, limiting the number to 10. For the first 3 or 4, I went with my interview schedule, and although my respondents seemed comfortable enough with the process, I was not. The night before my fifth interview, as I sat reflecting on my discomfort, I picked up Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) book *Doing Qualitative Research Differently*. As I read about narrative approaches and free association, I was able to loosen myself from the constraints of the interview schedule and explore an alternative that held more resonance for me.

As Hollway and Jefferson (2000) described, the narrative approach "emphasizes the meaning that is created within the research pair" (p. 31). In that context, stories become a way of better understanding our respondents and, consequently, the phenomenon under study. Hollway and Jefferson spoke of respecting the narrator's gestalt through the use of free associations, which "follow pathways defined by emotional motivations, rather than rational intentions" (p. 37). I realized that in the pursuit of a meaningful conversation about female spirituality, the shift from intellect to emotion was pivotal. Emotion, like menstruation or birth, occurs in the body. Once I had made this shift of perspective, the quality of the subsequent interviews more than vindicated the change.⁶

The conversation I engaged in the next morning was one of my most memorable experiences as a researcher. My respondent had transformed her lounge room into a temple, with fabric, lighted candles, leaves and flowers, photographs, artworks, crystals, books, journals, and many other precious objects. As I stood looking around the room in amazement, she commented, "I wanted to honor what you are doing with your research!" I spent the next 15 minutes poring in detail over all the beautiful things she had assembled, and by the time we began our conversation, we were already into a deeply sacred space where she felt safe to disclose her experiences and innermost understandings of my topic.

At the end of our conversation, I spoke of my discomfort at not being able to reciprocate her lavish generosity. Her reply was instant and forthright: "The work you are doing is how you reciprocate! This work so needs to be done, it's just not out there. That's why I've been so willing to share with you." I came away from that encounter validated, confirmed, and immeasurably enriched as a researcher and as a woman. I became much clearer in my focus of having a unique role to play in documenting women's own accounts of their intimate body experiences, "on the very personal business of being female in a patriarchal capitalist society" (Oakley, 2005, p. 226).

Each interview has become a spiritual experience in itself. As women have recounted their experiences of birthing and menstruation as spiritual epiphanies and crises, we have experienced the power of that spirituality infusing not only past memories but also the present encounter with deep meaning and spine-tingling energy. The dry term *data collection* gave me no clue that I would find the process such a rich, meaningful, and energizing one!

Autoethnography: Writing self into research

Ellis (2004, cited in Holman-Jones, 2005) has described autoethnography as “research, writing and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social” (p. 765). Autoethnography enables me to reflexively incorporate my personal experiences of female spirituality into my research, creating a space for dialogue and reflection that contributes to social change (Reinelt, 1998, cited in Holman-Jones, 2005). It recognizes the need for an engaged embodiment as a condition for that change and the power of emotion as an incitement to action (Holman Jones, 2005). Instead of the safety of the third-person abstraction, the “I” of this genre implicates me as researcher, right in the thick of the process (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). I draw on my experience—physical sensations, feelings, thoughts, intuitions—not simply as gratuitous self-disclosure but to illuminate the aspect of culture under study, as the following extract demonstrates:

Pregnancy

As I did the test, a thrill leapt up in me . . . and then wonder! It was like watching the very act of creation. There was a sense of destiny fulfilling itself, wheeling in to a mysterious, radically new sphere, like the stages in the evolution of a star. In its red-giant phase, a star can have a circumference the size of the orbit of Mars; yet at a later stage of its evolution, it collapses to become a white dwarf, with a circumference even smaller than the Earth.⁷ Same star, but a radical, irrevocable transformation! Its mode of existence is forever different, and the whole cosmos has to accommodate the change.

The news of my pregnancy heralded the same kind of cataclysmic change for me. Something was happening which would render me forever different—a transmutation set in motion by the same forces of creation that transformed a red giant into a white dwarf. It was truly an awesome prospect—to be given the opportunity to know this power of creation in the most intimate, deeply personal way—in my own flesh, and from the depths of my being. Yet it was also frightening—something much bigger than me, over which I had no control. I needed to rise to the challenge of fulfilling its remarkable rite of initiation, and so pierce the secret of its transforming power. With the startling and unexpected news of my pregnancy, I became aware of an obscure yet direct knowing—that one day this event would come to pass, as though it had always been written in the stars. It had been my own best-kept secret.

As this passage highlights, I experienced pregnancy, as I had experienced my first menstruation, as a spiritual phenomenon. In both instances, something vast took me up into itself, evoking a sense of awe, trepidation, and mystery that rippled with life. It was

an invitation to a different and expanded way of being. The discovery of pregnancy is a life-changing event; it initiates an ontological process of transformation, which, all being well, culminates in the birth of a child, a mother, a family. Yet even if the pregnancy does not continue to term for whatever reason, something has changed forever in the life of that woman. She can never return to her pre-pregnant state. To be pregnant is to be touched by the creative power of something infinitely greater than self and such proximity with the divine is transformational.

Feminism has “contributed significantly to legitimating the autobiographical voice associated with reflexive ethnography” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 740). Here, I enter the inseparability of body/voice and mind/thought, and discover a way of “creating a palpable emotional experience” (Holman-Jones, 2005, p. 767), which incites others to act. To effect the kind of cultural reform being advocated in my research, people need to feel its resonance in their own spirits.

In terms of its validity, Ellis and Bochner (2000) pointed out that readers test the story, “as they determine if it speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know” (p. 751). They elaborated further by asking whether the story illuminates unfamiliar territory, enabling the reader to come to an inside understanding of a previously obscure aspect of life. In including aspects of my story, my hope is that some of the inner dimensions of female spirituality can be articulated in a way that enlightens, resonates with, and validates other people’s experiences. Ultimately, the goal is to foster compassion and dialogue (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have outlined my methodological approach to researching spirituality, or “dancing with the wind.” My project takes up the challenge of expanding the qualitative frontier by engaging seriously with the topic of women’s spirituality. Sex differences deriving from the physiology of menstruation, pregnancy, birth, and lactation imply a uniquely female spirituality that is not the prerogative of maleness and has not as yet been researched. If women are to stand on our own terms as whole, integral human beings, second to none and “other” to no one, we need to be comfortable in our bodies and take possession of their extraordinary spiritual potential. By valuing our beautiful female biology and recognizing its unique spirituality, we can better safeguard the potential for optimal birth experiences and, at the same time, reclaim our female body processes as sacred ground, irrespective of maternity.

Notes

1. Many women, especially first-time mothers, feel co-opted into the obstetric discourse for complex social, gender-based reasons: for example, distrust of female body processes, privatized mothering, the gender-based division of labor, cultural alienation from nature, the rise of technocracy, and ideologies of motherhood based on expert (male) opinion, to name but a few.

2. Armstrong's study *The History of God* (1993, as cited in Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002) further corroborates the view that "humans are essentially spiritual animals" (p. 8).
3. The wind is often used as a metaphor for spirit (Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002).
4. Initially, I had also included a survey but found after only 4 interviews that it was not helpful or meaningful either for respondents or for me, so it was dropped.
5. This "herstory" was being enacted, not by uninformed risk takers but by an intelligent, articulate, well-informed and politically astute group of women, many of whom were professionals: social workers, teachers, doctors, midwives, and counselors. Pure gold for my research! Because my focus is exploring women's spirituality, it was valuable to access a group of women for whom the concept was a meaningful, lived reality. Not all women are interested in spirituality. Moreover, their educational level, professional background, and spiritual awareness seemed to endow them with the ability to articulate and conceptualize the phenomena under study in a way perhaps not so easily accessible to many other women.
6. I still sent respondents a copy of the interview schedule, but I qualified it by saying, "The questions on the schedule may help to prompt your memory, especially around early experiences of menstruation. Give some thought to what you feel most passionate about in those areas -menses, birth and spirituality and we'll go with that in the interview."
7. See, for example, the Pistol Star described in Cheetham's (2005) book.

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