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BOOK REVIEW:

_Midwifery: Preparation for Practice_, Sally Pairman, Jan Pincombe, Carol Thorogood, & Sally Tracy (Editors), Elsevier, Sydney 2006.

At over 850 pages and with more than 40 contributors informing the 39 chapters this text gives a comprehensive picture of Australian and New Zealand midwifery. It draws on research, theorising and the words of women and midwives. The learning outcomes, clinical scenarios, directions for reflective thinking, lists of online resources and review questions all add to its student friendly nature. For the second edition a glossary that introduces the language of midwifery to the novice would add to its utility.

With its aim to prepare midwives for autonomous practice in this region the book is truly different from anything else available. Its extensive presentation of contextual, legal and theoretical issues about practice mean that the text will also be useful to midwives who are already qualified. What is more, as many of the chapters are applicable beyond the specific geographical area it will be of international interest.

For the local midwife the chapters contrasting New Zealand and Australian professional and legal frameworks are a useful resource to facilitate employment mobility between the two regions.

As I come to the finalisation of my PhD I am working closely with theory so when I looked at this book theory was my focus. I wanted to know what it could tell us about our current conceptualisations of Australian & New Zealand midwifery, and therefore what messages it would send to students and practicing midwives reading its text. The chapters are structured to represent the philosophical framework of the midwife woman partnership. As such context, woman, midwife, partnership, autonomous
practice and collaborative practice are the section headings. Each of the sections focusing on practice address: physiology, assessment, evidence for practice, professional decision-making and professional judgements.

An early chapter by sociologist Karen Lane presents an understanding of the broader social field and an alternative to the biomedical model of illness. The chapter reveals the self, midwife or woman, as a complex ever changing being who is shaped by environment. By examining how politics and power operate to create fixed perspectives of the world this chapter sets the scene for subsequent more practically orientated chapters.

Place of birth is examined in the chapter by Maralyn Foureur and Marion Hunter. They consider what was lost when hospitals became the primary birth place and discuss the physiological implications of undisturbed labour. By addressing the impact that birth place has on the midwife’s belief in birth as physiologically normal the chapter challenges readers to consider what ‘real’ midwifery might be and whether its practice in large hospital settings is possible.

I was particularly interested in Joan Skinner’s writing on risk and safety. This chapter draws on her doctoral research to introduce the very practical, and portable, model of the birth stool for midwives. The three legs of the stool are ‘being a professional’, ‘working the system’ and ‘working with complexity’; the struts are story telling and the seat is ‘being with women’ (p.65). By sitting on the whole stool and attending to all its parts (legs, seat, struts) Skinner suggests that the midwife can negotiate women’s individual risk and safety issues. The strength of this model is that it allows for ‘the complex and messy world of practice’ and shows how we can still function if our stool is not perfectly balanced (p.69).

The theoretical frameworks for midwifery practice are presented in a chapter by Sally Pairman and Judith McAra-Couper. This chapter reacquaints us with the familiar theory of midwifery partnership but also introduces a second theory named ‘cultural safety’. This theory, arising from the bicultural environment of New Zealand, is a valuable testament to the importance of understanding difference in midwifery relationships. It prompts us to remember that ‘culturally safe care is provided when the recipient of that care determines that it is safe for them’ (p.237). In the chapter that follows the practicalities of working in partnership are discussed by Nicky Leap and
Sally Pairman. We are reminded of the powerful transformative process of birth. Working in partnership is identified as a pathway to facilitate change of the woman and of the midwife by opening ‘doors for both in terms of potential possibilities, joy and learning’ (p.267).

Partnership and cultural safety have broad applicability beyond the midwife woman relationship but are still of great importance to midwifery. However, the way that partnership and cultural safety work together is not clearly enunciated as yet. Furthermore I don’t believe that the two theories adequately address the environment or the changes, paradoxes and grey areas of practice. I see partnership and cultural safety as potentially making up part of a larger meta-theory of midwifery practice. Such a meta-theory could encompass and anchor the theories of Foureur, Hunter and Skinner which are far more specific to midwifery practice. Perhaps future editions of the book could address this gap with a third theory. Such a theory would help hold the other two theories together by addressing the continually changing nature of people, bodies, relationships and the world. A tripartite meta-theory encompassing the profession’s practice of midwifery partnership, the contextual background of cultural safety and the complexity of continual change could provide a truly stable foundation for women. Like Joan Skinner’s birth stool for midwives, this would be a stool for women to confidently sit and courageously open to the transformative processes of birth.

In conclusion, the book ‘Midwifery: Preparation for Practice’ will be a must for both students and qualified midwives, it is a must for libraries. I congratulate the authors and the contributors for an innovative and useful text. This is an exciting time of change for midwifery and with this book the profession will be admirably equipped for its own transformation.

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