

Improving Partner-Involvement in Childbirth Experiences

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“I only really grew up, after the birth of my first child.” – Partner

Introduction

This project aims to explore the experience of childbirth from the father’s/partner’s perspective. Whilst childbirth is typically under-researched in terms of the overall experience, this is especially true for the partner's perspective. This is understandable, given that the partner does not seem to play a crucial role; yet research has started to reveal that all participants in the situation do in fact crucially contribute to it and that an increased involvement of partners has various positive effects.

Data Collection: Interviews

German partners were asked the following interview questions:

1. Could you please describe being present at childbirth from your perspective? It can help to talk about the experience by way of a story, from beginning to end.
2. Do you have any thoughts on how the experience affected your relationship (to your partner and possibly to the baby)?
3. Is there anything you wish you had known beforehand? Is there any advice you would want to give to others who will undergo this experience?

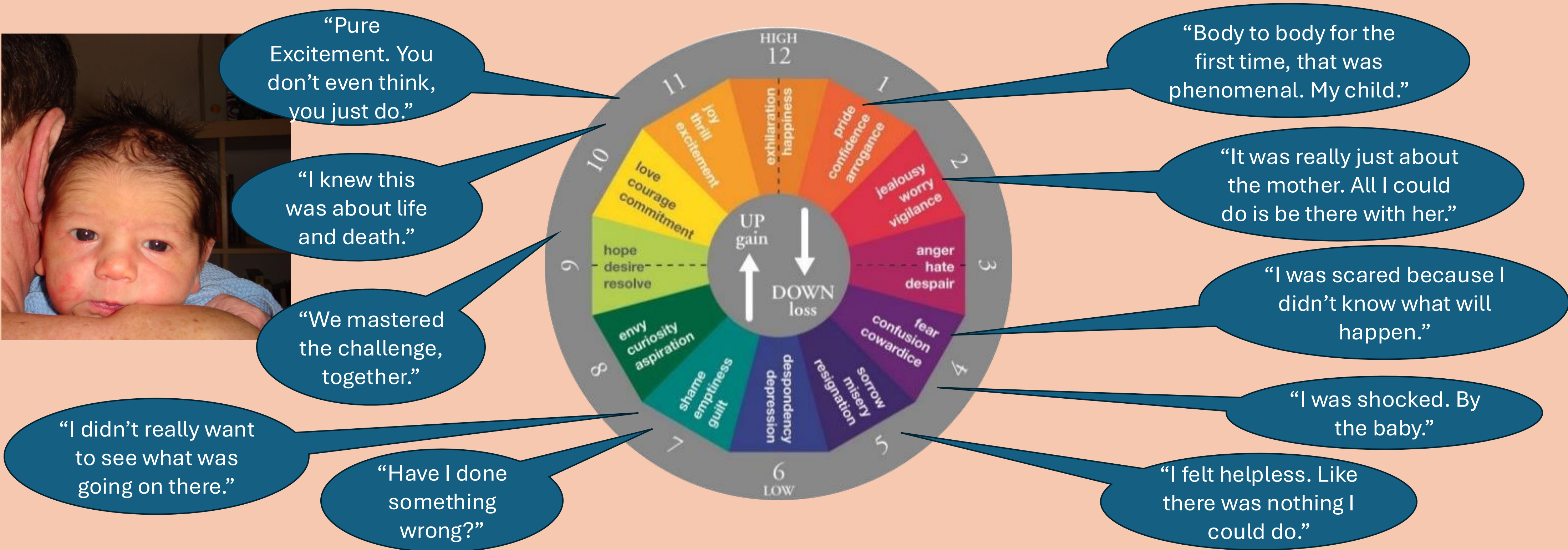
Project Aims and Objectives

- Understand the **experience of childbirth** more closely from the perspective of the partner.
- Map the **emotional landscape** of being present at childbirth.
- Explore connections between **communication and emotions**.
- Improve **partners’ involvement** in the childbirth experience.
- Contribute to the research and development of a **phenomenology of childbirth**.

Data Analysis: Phenomenology as Method

Phenomenology-based research methods provide an approach to the study that allows it to focus on **experience itself**. The focus shifts away from ‘what’ appears to me, bracketing any assumptions and prejudices around the investigated phenomenon, and towards ‘how’ it appears to me. This subsequently provides a linkage into those aspects of experience which may otherwise remain hidden. More concretely; Phenomenology provides the methodological framework for a research into the **moods** involved in the childbirth experience, the always developing context of **world** in which we experience, and the ways in which these are shaped by **communication** and our **being, with others, in the world**.

Mapping Interview Results using Professor Emmy van Deurzen’s Emotional Compass ^{1,2}



Key Findings

- The childbirth experience contains a **variety of emotions** for partners that go further than (e.g.) fear of something going wrong.
- Partners experience a similar **strangeness** (Staehler, T.) to mothers.
- There is a clear **change in the partner’s existence** from before to after birth. Partners feel the **new responsibilities** for the mother and the **always-demanding** child, but also for the upholding of **what was before** (one’s individual existence and work, passions, etc.).
- Knowledge of this change in existence is only **abstract** before birth and only becomes **concrete** after birth, as the role of ‘parent’ begins to **develop**, in a **phenomenologically new** context of world.
- **Midwives** carry an important role in carrying **concrete knowledge** of birth being possible into the situation. They take up an *angel-like* (Staehler, T.) role, as bearers of trust, security and professionalism that allow for parents to experience the ‘upside’ of the emotional compass©.

The childbirth-experience and change in existence that it delivers to partners evoke a variety of emotions and establish a new phenomenological context. This suggests the necessity for the development of an equally new communication (between mother, partner, child and midwife) of those moods, requirements and desires that are brought into existence by birth.

Further Research Outputs

The following research outputs will be developed as the research continues:

- Co-authored postscript for Tanja Staehler’s monograph *Pregnancy, Giving Birth, Being with Infants: Phenomenology of a Strange Experience*.
- Blog for *Lehr-Gut* (David Lauer et al.) on how to link academic philosophy to real-life situations.
- One additional video to the existent i-learn module for the *Royal College of Midwives* (third, expanded edition) on the ways in which midwives can encourage the involvement of partners present during childbirth.
- Feed results into 3-4 short videos on preparing for childbirth together (Impact Acceleration Account).

If you would like to be updated on the progress of the study, you are invited to message cf395@sussex.ac.uk or T.Staehler@sussex.ac.uk.

1: Van Deurzen, E. & Arnold-Baker, C. (2025). *Structural Existential Analysis: An existential-phenomenological method for reasearching life*. Routledge.
2: All quotes are translated by me and taken directly from interviews with German partners.