

Researchers at a recent British Psychological Society conference claim to have refuted the 'myth' that women's mental capacities diminish during pregnancy (HMG Worldwide 2003). Their small study investigated whether there was any justification in the idea that pregnant women tend to suffer from impaired memory and concentration, and found that, although the pregnant women felt that their memory and concentration were reduced, there were no differences in the cognitive abilities of the pregnant and non-pregnant women studied.

The authors clearly feel these results are very positive for women. They have shown that pregnant women score just as well on intellectual tests as non-pregnant women. They feel we can now be rid of the 'myth' that women have different cognitive capabilities during pregnancy. They are also keen to debunk another 'myth'; that women have different cognitive abilities at different stages of their menstrual cycle. Hooray! Women, even pregnant and menstruating women, have been shown to be just as 'rational' as men.

But is rationality what we really desire during pregnancy? I don't have any real doubt that women *can* be rational and intellectual during pregnancy, if that is their choice. I suspect that might have been the (possibly subconscious) choice of the pregnant women in this study, who may well have seen value and personal reward in proving their cognitive capabilities in tests against the scores of non-pregnant women. But I am not convinced that this is a route we should allow psychologists to take pregnancy down, at least not without first engaging in the debate.

I suppose, in questioning the value of this research, I could be seen as one of the midwives who is criticised by the authors of the study, for perpetuating the idea that the brain is different in pregnancy. But I don't do this to denigrate pregnant women, and I don't want to insist that pregnancy leads to automatic cognitive impairment. If anything, I am trying to hold a space for pregnant woman where it is acceptable to feel different, and where that does not lead to negative consequences,

sarcastic comments or assumptions about the value of their abilities. I want it to be okay for all pregnant women to experience whatever it means for them to be pregnant. If that means they want to carry on and be as rational as possible, perhaps staying in an intellectually demanding job until they give birth, then let's support that as their choice. But if they want to know it's also okay to be in a less-than-rational space for part or all of their pregnancy, then I'd like to support that possibility too.

Cultures which place a high value on rationality are usually characterised by male-based society and religion, and have tended to suggest that menstruating and sometimes pregnant women should be segregated because they are less than clean. Even today, while menstruating women are not segregated in the UK, we are still bombarded with adverts which offer products to help us hide the fact that we are menstruating and enable us to carry on with our everyday roles. Yet older, female-based philosophies enabled women to set themselves apart, so that they could experience and enjoy their 'differentness' (Eisler 1995). In some circles, the menstruating (and menopausal) woman is still perceived as especially magical and wise, and value is given to her increased ability to be intuitive, rather than taken from her decreased desire to be rational.

Some very experienced midwives have talked about the value of not being rational during pregnancy, and how this enables the woman's hormones and body to lead her in her journey towards birth and motherhood (Gaskin 2002; see also Wickham 1999). We clearly needed to move on from the image of the helpless and dependent middle class Victorian woman, in claiming the rights of women as equal and valuable community members, but it is quite another thing to find we are in danger of ending up in a position where we deny difference. My fear is that, by setting out to prove that pregnant women are no different to non-pregnant women, or from men, we will lose the little space that women do have to explore what female rites of passage mean for them.

I don't know whether the 'big pregnancy brain mush myth' is a myth or not. I don't know whether all women have the potential to experience a different kind of reality during menstruation, pregnancy and menopause, or whether this idea has developed as a way of simply allowing women more space at this time. I do know, both rationally and in my heart, that to continue to extol the rational as better than other ways of being and knowing is not going to take us nearly as far as if we could stay open to the possibilities and stop trying to deny or remove difference.

References

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