

Pondering the Post-Birth Tea Break Sara Wickham

There is no trouble so great or grave that cannot be much diminished by a nice cup of tea. Bernard-Paul Heroux

There is a time, during what is known in some circles as the fourth stage of labour and birth, when rest and refreshment become the priority. The exact nature of the refreshment varies according to geography, culture and perhaps tradition. For many British women and midwives, there is no question about what this post-birth break should constitute. Around eighty women will have given birth in the UK in the last hour, and I would be willing to bet that the majority of them, either now or in the next few minutes, will be enjoying a cup of tea made for them and their partner by a midwife or other caregiver. The offering of post-birth tea (often along with hot buttered toast) is such a feature of everyday midwifery practice in the UK that it is rarely discussed or questioned.

I first started paying attention to the significance of the post-birth cup of tea when I was attending births in the USA. The offering and making of tea and toast after birth had been such an integral part of my learning as a British student midwife that I continued to offer this to new mothers in the USA, with widely varying reactions. Some women would politely decline, and ask for water or juice instead, while others would accept in a way that suggested that, while they quite liked the sound of having a pot of tea made for them, it would never have occurred to them to ask for this if I hadn't suggested it. I realised fairly quickly that the concept of post-birth tea and toast was a ritual that, if not uniquely British, did not hold the same meaning for women in all other cultures. I then began to wonder what meaning it held for women and midwives in the UK - and perhaps elsewhere - and found a group of ten UK-based midwives at a workshop that I was facilitating who were willing to sit around a tape recorder with me and ponder this question. This article presents the outcomes of that pondering and constitutes midwives' reflections rather than an in-depth qualitative analysis of this area.

The Fundamentals of the Tea Break

The first area of discussion, which we returned to a number of times, concerned the everyday nature of tea-drinking and the importance of the tea break as a social ritual. While there are many forms of tea, the standard caffeinated black variety – also known, depending on where you live, as rosie, char, a brew, builder's tea or gumboot tea - is generally considered the norm, and there was a consensus that the taking of a break to make and / or drink tea is a key part of everyday British life.

We drink tea all the time, don't we? You get in from shopping and think, 'ooh, cup of tea', and, 'I get to see my friend, ooh great, let's have a cup of tea'.

While there isn't necessarily a wrong time to drink tea, we reflected upon the temporal points at which people tend to drink tea and the possible implications of this.

Like when you're decorating or something, and you say, 'shall we have a tea break?'

Yes, yes, or when your friend comes round, you say, 'let's sit down and have a cup of tea...'

Yes, or you put your feet up and have a cup of tea and a little rest...

We noted that, at least within British culture, there was no absolute correlation between tea and the concept of the tea break, in that a number of people do not drink black tea, but would have a tea break for another kind of drink instead. As an aside, several of us knew people who did not like the taste of tea, coffee or an alternative hot drink, but who will join their friends and family by having a mug of hot water. It is possible to interpret such actions as underscoring the cultural importance of tea and tea breaks, which are considered to be a way of taking small amounts of time out from everyday life and work. For some people, the tea break enables the taking of a few minutes' rest in between doing different things and in some circumstances it marks a transition from one activity to another.

It creates a space and a break, doesn't it? Because you can't do a lot else while you're having a cup of tea...

At its most basic level, then, the post-birth tea break may be a way of carving out a few minutes of resting time – perhaps for the midwife as well as for the woman and her companions – when nothing needs to be done. Several of us observed that some midwives have their own individual check-lists of things that need to be done before the tea break occurs. Some midwives, for example, see the birth of the placenta and the assessment and possible repair of the woman's perineum as unequivocally pre-tea-break tasks, while others see potential for flexibility, especially in the case of a long (but otherwise non-worrisome) third stage or where they perceive a need to give the woman time to make a decision about whether or not to have an intervention such as perineal repair.

I have a couple of times said, 'you know, let's take five and have some tea' when I felt like the situation was a bit highly strung and it just seemed like we needed to move the energy elsewhere for a while. And what's the harm? It's not like anything really bad is going to happen just from having a break and getting a cup of tea.

The tea break was also felt to mark the transition that occurs when labour is over and the woman re-emerges into a more normal (in the sense of no longer being in labour) space. This aspect of the postnatal tea break is further illustrated by a comment that was made in response to the one immediately above.

It's not that I disagree with what you're saying... I'm not saying I would say no to making the tea before all that's been done, but I would rather wait 'til the placenta's delivered and the suturing and that has been done, 'cause I do think there is something about it that's like, well it's all done now, all the work is done and now we can relax.

Robbie Davis-Floyd¹ discussed the way in which a rite of passage involves (among other things) the removal of a person from her existing world and her later re-emergence back into that world, and looked at birth in the light of this concept. It is possible

that, for some women and midwives, the postnatal tea and toast (or any regional variation on this) break symbolically marks this re-emergence of the woman from the journey of labour and back into the world.

I think it also makes you sit down for that two minutes, just sort of take stock of what's happened, focus on it, rather than rushing around thinking, I'd better get on with something.

The midwives that I talked with, however, also saw some deeper meanings and implications of the tea break which link with some of the key ways in which midwives work to promote normal birth and support women to have the experience that they desire in different settings.

Tea as an Assurance of Normality

As a group, we felt that tea was often used to help in situations where tragedy had occurred, perhaps in an effort to bring about a sense of normality:

They do on Eastenders, don't they? Somebody dies, the whole fairground crashes down, somebody puts the kettle on, like it's a panacea.

This feature of British culture has been noted elsewhere. A few hours after the so-called 7/7 terrorist attacks occurred in London in 2005, a blogger posted the following onto the Internet:

"When the news reporter said "Shopkeepers are opening their doors bringing out blankets and cups of tea" I just smiled. It's like yes. That's Britain for you. Tea solves everything. You're a bit cold? Tea. Your boyfriend has just left you? Tea. You've just been told you've got cancer? Tea. Coordinated terrorist attack on the transport network bringing the city to a grinding halt? Tea dammit!"²

One of the midwives reflected upon the question of whether this tendency had a parallel in midwifery:

Is it also linked though, with 'there was no disaster'? Because we're talking about all the bad things that happen, like car crash, disaster or somebody dies, [and somebody

else might say] sit down, I've got some bad news for you, I'll make you a cup of tea. Then all of a sudden around childbirth, we're offering that very same panacea as you call it, following the birth.

We also discussed the way in which, for many people, tea feels comforting and familiar; both of which may serve to bring about a sense of security. Some of the midwives who discussed this felt that this may have an actual therapeutic value which could be more pertinent for women who had given birth in hospital, particularly after long or difficult births. Again, there was a feeling that this sense of comfort and security may derive from the status and meaning of tea within some cultures, and I have become aware that the same is said of certain other drinks in other areas of the world. It is not uncommon for small British children to ask for cups of tea when their parents have one, and they will often initially be given cups of very weak tea containing large amounts of cow or soy milk which become stronger and less milky as they grow up. Early experiences of drinking tea (or another beverage) with one's family may reinforce the cultural importance of tea drinking as well as acting as a means of passing on notions about the nature, timing and meaning of tea breaks. On another level, the slow transition from weak milky tea to stronger tea over time may be one means through which children learn not only to like the taste of tea, but to come to associate it with a sense of familiarity and a feeling of comfort.

In our society, if you're stressed or if there's a problem tea is such a 'well, at least we can all sit down and have a cup of tea, no matter what else has gone on before'. Somehow it normalises it, or makes it feel a bit safer...

Tea, Choice and the Birthing Environment

This issue of normalisation also highlights some of the concerns that continue to exist around different environments of care. Women and midwives have long compared the very different features of home, hospital and other birthing spaces, and it is not uncommon for critics to describe hospitals as unfamiliar, potentially fear-inducing environments that may not be conducive to women's comfort (on any level) or to the facilitation of normal physiological birth. It is

understandable that midwives might turn to the familiar tradition of tea-making as a way of helping women to recover from a sense of displacement and / or trauma. Yet if this is brought about not simply by the experience of the rite of passage that is normal labour, but caused by the very institution that a woman has turned to for help, then surely we need to be focusing less on the therapeutic value of the teapot and more on how we can remove the cause of the trauma?

Having further discussed the postnatal tea break with midwives working in different countries and settings, it strikes me that tea is seen by some women and midwives as less important in home birth settings, where it is just as likely that a tray of chocolate and champagne will appear.

[As a home birth midwife], I don't offer tea, I ask the woman what she would like. And some ask for tea, but some ask for other things too.

Clearly, choice is just as important here as in every other area of midwifery practice. Just as importantly, some of the midwives note that, within some areas of British birthing culture, postnatal tea and toast is an expectation which some women view as an essential aspect of their care.

At the home births I've been to, there's less of the "let's have a cup of tea", there are other things going on, but hospitals, definitely, there's more of a ritual.

The thing my mother always said she missed most about when she had me [in hospital], she said, "I had you at three o'clock in the morning, and nobody even brought me a cup of tea". All these years on, she still remembers that.

While this apparently simple ritual may well reflect deeper and potentially problematic issues which are well worthy of our attention, the focus of our discussions kept returning to the way in which, while tea is an everyday thing within some cultures, the tea break can also be seen as a way of marking something different; perhaps even special.

Is it our way of marking just how ordinary birth is and yet it's so special? It is like that, so special, so wonderful and yet so normal.

Yes. I don't actually drink tea, but I asked for a cup of tea after I gave birth!

Women often say, it's the best cup of tea in the world, that one, and their mother or birth partner, they often say they remember that cup of tea afterwards. It's obviously significant on many levels.

The emotional linkages that these midwives make between tea and feelings of normality, happiness, achievement or satisfaction may well serve to play an important part in their personal experience of post-birth re-emergence, yet it is not necessarily the tea itself that is important, but the presence of whatever food and fluid hold significance for the individual woman. In some circles, as above, women planning home births will have had a bottle of champagne chilling in their fridge for weeks before their birth is imminent. Here, the drink itself may be more associated with notions of celebration, but the overall message is the same:

We can relax now, all the work is done and everything is OK.

Tea as a Gift from the Midwife

When the midwives that I talked to reflected on their own feelings about the experience of making and sharing tea after birth, a number of them pondered questions about whether this was also a way of giving something back to women.

*Is it seen as a reward? You've done really well and given birth to your baby, I'd like to make you a cup of tea now. ... It's a gift **and** a completion.*

Two of the midwives in particular talked about how much they love this element of their job.

I make a big thing of it, really, because I don't use hospital cups, I've just bought the Birth Centre I work at a tea set and some mugs, so it looks really nice and I make a tray of tea and maybe banana sandwiches, and I just really enjoy that part of my job!

Me too, I do things like find a little milk jug, I don't put it in a plastic cup, it's almost like an old fashioned thing. And if I can I find a paper napkin and it's the whole thing of

presenting it. You don't go to the tea machine, do you, and get a plastic cup of tea, you make a whole tray.

This midwife's comment about the putting together of a nicely presented tea tray as 'an old fashioned' thing again highlights the degree to which this practice is rooted in tradition; a term which is often viewed negatively by those of us who are seeking to challenge entrenched ways of thinking and practising. It is not, however, the existence of traditions per se which is problematic, but the unquestioning continuation of traditions which serve no useful purpose and which remain in place as an alternative to thinking and being in new and better ways. In this case, when we asked if they might be able to reflect on why they love making this tea so much, one of these midwives replied:

It's a gift. To me, I feel really, really privileged to be at a birth, I feel that the woman and the family and the baby have given me this huge gift, and it gives me a chance to give something back.

In a world which remains predominantly patriarchal and which does not place a high value on women's work in general and on birth-giving and mothering in particular, the tradition of teamaking may reflect midwives' desire to celebrate birth and to make spaces in which women are honoured and gifted for their efforts, albeit briefly.

Tea as a Way of Making Time and Space

In fact, the way in which a tea break, as above, is seen as a way of marking time and making space was another ongoing feature of our discussion.

Also it buys you time, cause there's pressure, isn't there, to get people off the labour ward? And you can say, "but they're having a cup of tea..."

Again, and perhaps unsurprisingly, a distinction was made by some of the midwives between the importance of and need for this kind of space-making in different environments.

Not when you're at home, though, you don't need that [space] then.

As a further reminder of the vastly different needs of women, however, it is important to remember that a positive birthing experience can occur – or be prevented from occurring – in any physical environment.

My best birth was actually in hospital. My home birth, I felt like I was swept up, cleaned up far too quickly. I realised afterwards that I had wanted us all to stop for a tea break, but it never happened...

This experience, while hugely important, was unique within the group. By far the biggest issue that arose in this area concerned the importance of tea as a way of claiming time for women and families on the labour ward. A good many of the midwives who participated in this discussion whole-heartedly agreed with the following midwife who summarised what she saw as one of the greatest legacies of the British tea-worshipping culture.

It's good when you go out [of the woman's room and on to the labour ward] and what you're actually doing is promoting skin to skin... When you've got one of those midwives on who wants you to hurry and get them to postnatal [ward], and you say, "They're having a cup of tea", I think it's easier for them to accept [that] than saying, "they're doing skin to skin".

In an ideal world, there would be no need for midwives to have to invoke such cultural reference points simply to enable new families to take the time to get to know each other. In the way less-than-ideal world in which we currently live, birth and practice the art of midwifery, I have to say I find it rather reassuring that midwives are continuing to find creative ways of being with women even in the midst of the production-line bureaucracy in which many of us work.

Towards the end of our discussion, some of the midwives commented upon what they felt they had realised during our conversations.

We often look at other cultures and say, they have all these lovely rituals and we just don't have any, and I think we do actually. We have this ritual about tea, but it's so normal we don't recognise it as such.

We're lucky then, that we do have a ritual, that there is a ritual around childbirth.

Yes, we think these are the little, unimportant things, but then you think about it, and talk about it, and realise how important it can be.

I previously suggested that, at its most basic level, the post-birth tea break might be a means of carving out a few minutes of resting time for women and perhaps midwives. As I hope this discussion shows, the meaning of the postnatal tea (and toast, but that's another article) break for these midwives actually appears to encompass far more than that. It reflects some of the key values which these midwives prioritise as they work with women, not least of which highlight the importance they place upon focusing on normality, promoting women's choice, reflecting on practice and creating protected time and safe spaces for women, babies and families.

It is impossible to say whether these values are reflected in similar rituals and practices that have developed in other cultures and areas, or even whether they are shared by the majority of British midwives. To aim for such generalisations would be to miss the point. Whether or not any individual woman or midwife can relate personally to the issues raised by our analysis of this particular (and possibly peculiar) ritual, I would suggest that there is a further issue to be considered in the light of this kind of reflection. We have reached a stage where we have realised that there is more to life than evidence, and that our own and others' stories, experiences and reflections offer a rich vein of knowledge for practice. I often claim that much knowledge can be gained by sitting a group of midwives around a bottle of wine or - more fittingly in this case - a pot of tea, and I hope that this sharing of the discussion and reflection of one group of midwives emphasises the value of pondering even the most simple of things. Finally, I would like to say a huge "thank you" to all of the midwives who shared their thoughts and pondered their experiences with me.

References

1. Davis-Floyd, RE (2004). *Birth as an American rite of passage* (2nd ed). Berkeley: Univ. California Press
2. Jslayeruk, posting in Metaquotes Livejournal 7/7/2005 at www.livejournal.com