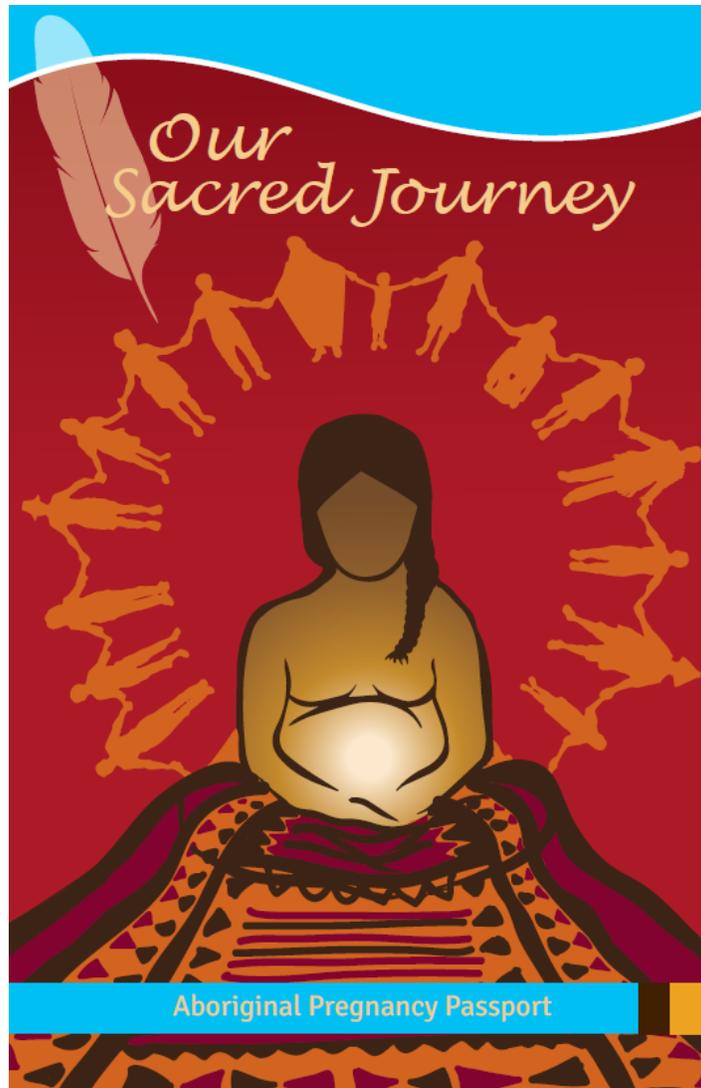


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Birthing Naturally & Culturally
Pregnancy, Birth & Post-partum



Research paper as part of the companion training at birth, doula level 1

Followed by Isabelle Challut

Introduction

Since the beginning of human kind and for many centuries to follow women pro-created, carried and birthed naturally. In the literature, we see eras where women had total control over their choices about birthing, to eras where women were forced into hospitals where pregnancy was treated as a disease and overtaken by medical procedures. In recent research on birthing, we see our society beginning to return to the more traditional ways of birthing naturally. Medical professionals are now acknowledging the benefits of birthing naturally and the way in which medical interventions often cause consequences for the mother and new born baby. These topics will be discussed more along this paper. However, the focus of this paper is to understand how First Nations people birthed naturally and within their cultural values before colonization. First Nations people have been exposed to many forms of assimilation which resulted in many tribes losing connection with their culture and language. In consequence of this, First Nations people have also lost the freedom, pride and confidence of birthing naturally accompanied by the ceremonial beliefs that helped us through this very special time.

The more I learnt about midwives, doulas and the benefits of birthing naturally I began to ask myself what would it mean for First Nations women to birth naturally but also culturally. As a First Nations woman who has experienced birth, I often felt I had no guidance in terms of birthing naturally nor how to return to my roots and birth culturally. The First Nations culture is very vast and for the purpose of this paper I will be concentrating on the Algonquin Nation and their cultural beliefs regarding pregnancy, birth

and post-partum. Themes that will be explored in this paper will be: beliefs, values, ceremonies, access to services for First Nations women during the phase of pregnancy, birth and post- partum and questioning how can culture help women during their maternal journey. Another important theme that will be re current throughout the paper will be the connection of this research and how this knowledge could help me as a doula in assisting women on their maternal journey.

The History



To begin, I feel it is important to understand the realities that First Nations women are facing today in regards to pregnancy, birth and post-partum. First Nations women have faced social and cultural changes that have negatively impacted on their health, cultural identity, social structures and traditional values. First Nations Social work research has demonstrated the damaging effects of government policies, the denigration of traditional healing practices and the removal of pregnant women from their communities into southern urban areas. In First Nations' research it is well known that First Nations women once birthed in their communities accompanied by midwives or supported by other women from the community. It is also well documented that due to assimilative policies and the creation of reservations in isolated areas, First Nations women today face many social,

economic, physical, mental and emotional obstacles during the birthing process. Research on the other hand is showing the positive effects and outcomes midwifery had on pregnant mothers, their birthing and the outcomes for their infants. First Nations communities are advocating to have traditional midwifery return in combination with the modern medical knowledge to be able to address a specific and unique need for First Nations women and their children (D. Carroll & C. Benoit, 2004, p.263).

In many First Nations communities, they provided their own prenatal care with the help of midwives or with the help of other women in the community. In First Nations' communities young women, in their teenage years, were taught by the older women and this knowledge was passed down from generation to generation. This was done by watching, helping and attending the births that took place in the community. It was not "until the late 1970's, when medical evacuation became commonplace" (O'Driscoll, 2011, p.24). Colonization dispossessed First Nations people's ways of healing and then forced them to become assimilated into a system they did not understand, being separated from their families and communities to birth without traditional practices. Due to these forms of assimilation, many of the cultural and traditional values of birthing naturally and culturally were diluted.

Today in First Nations communities, there are no prenatal services for pregnant women they often have to seek services outside the community. This means leaving their families and community to the larger cities to have medical support. As pregnancy requires many doctor visits this also requires mothers to travel many hours to the nearest hospital or clinic. Therefore, there are a great number of women who will not have prenatal visits with doctors until it is time to birth. This also means that when women are ready to birth often

have to be transported outside the community, either by plane or leave weeks ahead to stay in the locations where there are hospitals. All of these factors leave women feeling isolated, experiencing culture shock, feeling lonely because their family cannot be with them during the time of birth to welcome that new life that will deeply impact all loved ones. (G. Castelloux, social worker, personal interview, July 15, 2017). Another important issue for First Nation women is the racism that takes place within hospitals and within all health care services. There are many negative experiences that a white privileged individual would not receive the same treatment. Also due to the history of First Nations people in Canada, it is only normal that the First Nations women birthing do not trust the medical system which puts them in a very vulnerable position to speak up for their experiences while birthing. The Native Youth Sexual Network says “there is really a big access issue to not simply having a doula, per se, but to education around birth and just reproductive in general”. She says “just having access to quality healthcare that is respectful to people’s individual cultures and their individual needs and, really, their identities” (Beginning Journey: First Nations Pregnancy Resource, p.10). First Nations people have faced many forms of assimilation and this has deeply impacted the cultural values and practices that once oversaw pregnancy, birth and post-partum.

As was mentioned earlier, First Nations midwives were very present in the communities and the birthing was done naturally within the care of these women. There were many beautiful rituals and ceremonies that were done throughout a woman’s life to prepare them for the life they would one day carry. As elder Josee Whiteduck shared “when young women would first start their menstrual cycle they were taken into the moon lodge where they would stay for the duration of their cycle and all the women and grandmothers from

the community would care for her and share women teachings. This was done so that young girls, now becoming women, could learn about the responsibilities women held within the community, the family unit and to mother earth. Women were taught about the water and how they would now become responsible to care for and protect that water. During these ceremonies, women would bless the water with their prayers and songs and then the water would become medicine for the people to drink. Water represented life. Women's first menstrual cycle represented that their bodies were now ready to carry the water that would birth life. Young women were told that in this water is where that spirit starts. Women were chosen as that special person to do the creator's work, carry life into this world. This was a huge responsibility and the whole community would become this women's protector and provider, they were all waiting to welcome this new life. The reason why the water was a women's responsibility was because in order for women to birth they would one day carry life within that water inside their womb. This is why water is so sacred to women and also why they had to understand its importance". (J. Whiteduck, elder, personal interview, June 5, 2017). Many rituals took place during a young woman's life in preparation of the child she would one day carry. Another example of these teachings was the berry fast. Berry fast took place during adolescent years where young women would not eat berries for an entire year. The reasoning behind this teaching was that these young women would sacrifice something which in turn would teach them that when carrying and caring for a child would mean putting that child before yourself" (Kinosway E., elder, personal interview April 14,2017).

Pregnancy



In the First Nations culture, pregnant women were always considered sacred because of the life they carried. They were honored for being the bridge between the spiritual world and the life we have on earth. The teachings were a lot like what we hear now: take care of your body; rest when needed; eat well so your baby is healthy; exercise; be positive so your baby will not feel stress; be active; sing songs and tell stories to your baby so they will recognize your voice; rub your belly so your baby knows touch and stand near the drum so your baby knows the heartbeat of mother earth. Everything that was taught to us was to prepare us on how to care for our young ones.

The elders or midwives held important ceremonial roles in the pregnancies of women in the community. For example, with the first movement of the baby an elder or midwife pipe carrier would gather other grandmothers and take the mother out on the land. They would lay her on the ground so she could be connected to mother earth. They would then smoke the sacred pipe, put their hands on the mother's stomach pray and meditate to the ancestors for the well -being of that mother and child. (National Collaboration Center for Aboriginal Health, 2012, p.6).

I personally feel that the way our young women were taught and guided helped them become strong independent mothers who you could trust themselves and the choices they would make for their children. I feel this is a strong tool that could be used in terms of assisting women in becoming mothers, making sure to respect them and to teach rather than tell them what is right or wrong. I also feel that this way of culturally accompanying pregnancy helps celebrate life and all of its aspects rather than viewing it as a disease that must be monitored. This way of assisting helps bring back the natural journey of birthing.

Birth



During the birth process the water teachings come back. Author Rachel Olson interviewed an Indigenous woman that was part of the Midewiwin Ceremonies who shared that “What is the first thing to happen when we go into labour? Our mucus plug goes and then our water breaks, this water cleanses the passage for that infant to be born. There is spirit that comes, during that time when the water breaks, and washes that doorway for the new spirit to come. She called the spirit *Seeimigaykwe* which means she who pours the water. This song would be sung to encourage and welcome that new spirit. Because this is a very painful passage for that spirit, and then you sing and calm that spirit. It is also very calming and soothing for the mother (2013, p.5).

In some tribes at the time of birth women would be brought into the moon lodge accompanied by other women in the community or a midwife. The lodge always had fresh cedar for this was known as the women's medicine. They would put it all over the ground to make a soft bed for the women to birth. In other more nomadic tribes often the women's husband would deliver the baby if they were out on the land either in a tipi or cabin. Positioning again was up to the women but most women birthed on all fours or in a squatting position. For late births, raspberry leaves would be used in a tea form to help induce contractions, they also had certain roots to help manage pain and numbing. When the baby was born the father and grandfather would be there to greet the child. The most important things for the newborn's arrival were that they have their spirit name, their clan and their language. These would be the first words spoken to the child. (Beaucage P., elder, attended ceremony, April 20, 2016). In some tribes they would also place a hide bracelet on the baby's wrist for protection. In some tribes a traditional drummer would be called upon to sing a welcoming song during and after the birth. In First Nations beliefs it was very important to help create the bond between mother and infant, this was done through skin to skin contact. The baby's first bath was a cedar bath, they were in some sense cleansed with the women's medicines (National Collaboration Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2012, p.8). Breastfeeding was the norm in most communities for practical and emotional reasons, it was seen to reinforce the bond between mother and child. Elder Kinosway shared that if a mother was unable to lactate for some unknown reason another mother in the community would do so for the baby. A feast would take place a few days later once the mother and child were settled in to help welcome that life into the community (Kinosway, E., Personal Interview with Elder, 2017).

Even to this day we have powwows that are social gatherings with dancing, drumming and feasting. During these powwows we have welcoming new life to the circle and we also have walking out ceremonies for the babies that are now walking into the circle for the first time. First Nations women were taught to carry their child for the first year of life or until the child was ready to walk. However, the child could not touch mother earth until their walk out ceremony.

For First Nations women part of the birthing experience is to collect the placenta after birth and to return it to mother earth. They would do so by wrapping the placenta in birch bark or cloth and taking it out in the forest where it was either buried or hung in a tree. Sometimes they would take the umbilical cord and tie it to the baby's tikinagan (cradle board) so the baby would not cry for its loss. Rachel Olson shares in her article that once the umbilical cord was dried and ready to fall, if it was a boy they would place it under deer or moose tracks to ensure they become a good hunter and girls under berry trees so they would become good gatherers; welcoming them into the world of living off the land. All these teachings symbolized the connection between the child, all her relations and mother earth "it was way of giving back to the earth, because the earth gave us life" (2013, p.348). For First Nations people the relationship with the land is very important to understanding who we are as individuals and where we come from, creating this sense of belonging. The ceremonies that took place during birth and the care of the infant's placenta and umbilical cord directly helped that child be connected with the land. When women are being evacuated to birth in urban areas, far from their communities, these ceremonies are not taking place and often they are being refused. For example, hospitals are refusing individuals to leave with their placenta which directly interferes with their

cultural practices. These cultural barriers are having a negative impact on the women and their babies. For example author Rachel Olson (2013) shares that “ the grandmothers said that the reason our youth are scattered and bewildered so much is because a lot of those things are being discarded in the garbage” (p.438). For First Nations people whom want to experience their maternal journey in a cultural way, it is very important for them to retrieve all the parts that were connected to the baby and the womb for the ceremonial rituals that accompany them.

Post-Partum



Post-Natal care was a midwife responsibility or to those grandmothers in the community. Often the women would care for the mother and take over her responsibilities such as caring for older children, cooking, and house chores until she was feeling ready to do so. As O'Driscoll mentions in his article “the concern over the fragility of life motivated the creation of many protocols and customs to protect the new baby” (2012, p.8). The most important factor for infant care was developing the sense of security and this was done through swaddling and carrying the baby close to you. In traditional times First Nations women swaddled their babies with moss bags and used cradle boards to carry them close with them at all times. Breastfeeding was an important component to the infant’s nutrition

and for creating that mother child bond “feeding from the breast was thought to transfer from the mother all the things she has learned and all her good thoughts” (O’Driscoll, 2012, p.9). Elder Josee Whiteduck shares that back in the old days mothers used moss to make disposable materials for their baby’s diapers. Mothers would breastfed until the age of two generally and sometimes till the age of five. She also shared that during the post-partum recovery the grandmothers would use natural remedies to help the woman in her healing process (Whiteduck J., elder, personal interview, June 5, 2017).

My role as a Doula



Before even starting this research paper I had a view on what values and beliefs I would want to carry within my role in assisting women in their maternal journey and these values and beliefs include: non-judgement; love, respect; courage; honesty; open-mindedness; a knowledge sharer; understanding; advocating for women’s right; trust in women and their decisions; patience and most importantly working from the truest part of my heart. As a doula I want to honor all women. The more I searched and learned through my research it became clear that the most important part of my role is providing women with information to make informed choices within any cultural beliefs they hold. This paper was geared toward First Nations women since this is the group of people I would be most in

contact with within my role as a doula, as well as being a First Nations woman and living on reserve. I feel this learning experience has allowed me to understand that as a First Nations front line worker and a doula volunteer, I have a responsibility to advocate for First Nations in the health care system and its services regarding pregnancy and birthing. As solely a doula, my responsibility is to ensure that First Nations women have the information and networks to choose if they would like to involve cultural aspects into their maternal experience. I also feel it is important to help these women receive culturally sensitive care throughout their pregnancy, birth and post-partum experiences. My view on the maternal journey is being able to appreciate the celebration of that new life and to honor that this new life will change these parent's lives forever. For myself, the cultural aspects of this research paper has really helped me connect with myself and understand the ways in which culture has helped our women appreciate and feel connected with this maternal journey, to really develop that relationship with the spirit growing inside of them and cherishing life in a whole different way. I dream to one day bring these cultural teachings and protocols back to my community and to be able to offer all our women this option not only within the community but also within Canada's health care system.

Conclusion

To conclude, we must remember the history of First Nations people and the assimilative policies that have deteriorated the culture and language that once guided and celebrated pregnancy, birthing and post-partum care; most importantly the negative impacts this has had on mothers and their infants. The culture is reviving and First Nations women want to return to the natural and cultural ways of birthing, which makes it extremely important for midwives and doulas to help women achieve these wishes during their maternal

journey. Traditional ceremonies play a very important role in the pre-conception, pregnancy, birth and postpartum in terms of allowing women to feel strong; connecting to their culture and land; independent; supported; understood; informed and free in their choices. As in working with any Nation, this is the core of what a doula must believe, allowing women to have freedom in their choices concerning themselves and their child to come.

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