DISCOVERING OPUS – EXPLORING CREATIVITY
IN MIDWIFERY AND NURSING

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ABSTRACT

The very notion of creativity in midwifery and nursing is an absurdity for most people. Stereotypical images of nurses and midwives as efficient, routinised and conscientiously attendant, performing work that is mundane, unexciting and often distasteful, persist. These images endure because of the historical effects of tradition, regimentation and subservience.

Despite the considerable research that has been conducted in nursing and midwifery, little is known about nurses and midwives as discrete individuals nor about their feelings about themselves and what they do within the reality of nursing's and midwifery's history, context and development; even less is known about nurse, midwives and creativity. The aim of the research for this thesis has therefore been to enable midwives and nurses to express and explore their feelings, thoughts and perceptions about their roles, work and most importantly themselves as professionals and as individuals, through a focus on creativity.

Creativity has long been viewed as the domain of artists, although historically it has also been the source of considerable debate regarding 'ownership' between scientists, philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, and educators among others. Ownership of creativity has not however been an issue for either nursing or midwifery. Although creativity has featured in the nursing and midwifery literature for many years, it has been the subject of only a small amount of research in either. An edified understanding of creativity and its dynamics and place in nursing and midwifery has therefore never been attained.

The use of creativity as the essence for exploration in this research enabled the 227 nurses and midwives involved to consider diverse perspectives of their professional practice and personal lives, in a different and very potent manner. Creativity touched a particular chord with them and they shared their perceptions and interpretations of it in rich and meaningful expressions.

The design for this research involved both triangulation of approaches and methodological pluralism. It has been termed an eclectic inquiry (after Hicks and Hennessey 1997) to indicate the reciprocity of the varied ways of inquiring that have
been brought together to achieve an inclusive and informed study. The research commenced with a critical history of nursing and midwifery over the last twenty-five years in Australia to identify a context for the actual inquiry into creativity. Subsequent to this a phenomenological study into nurses’ and midwives’ lived experiences of creativity was conducted simultaneously with a quantitative investigation assessing their self-perceived creativity. This was followed by a grounded theory inquiry pertaining to creativity in practice and related personal perspectives.

The critical history divulged a culture of mistrust, cynicism and perpetual reality that is perennially sabotaging the essence of both nursing and midwifery and their individual members. In particular there is an endemic mistrust of tertiary graduates in nursing and midwifery that has ensured them of a disdainful socialisation steeped in ritual and tradition, despite over twenty years of cessation of hospital based ‘training’ in nursing. This mistrust combined with cynicism has also enabled a form of professional ageism to develop working against newer and/or less experienced nurses and midwives often with dismal consequences. A retrograde hegemony within nursing and midwifery, more destructive than any threat from the medical profession, persists to suppress innovation and originality in order to resist change and protect the status quo with a proliferation of subjugation.

The assessment of self-perceived creativity showed the nurses and midwives involved in this research to be in the mid to high range of creativity overall across a number of measures. Particular variables exerted effects to varying degrees on nurses’ and midwives’ creativity, most notably their level of practice, their skill acquisition level and their workplace. New graduates showed high scores for self-perceived creativity that diminish markedly over skill acquisition advancement. Concurrently however new graduates have shown a much lower sense of personal and professional identity than those above them have. The professional transition experiences of new graduates require urgent review because of these alarming findings.

An unexpected finding of this research exposed a critical need to reconsider the use and place of reflection as a focal pinnacle in midwifery and nursing theory and practice. Reflection has been shown to be perpetuating retrogressive thinking and a
reversionary orientation in nurses and midwives and has not been able to take them out of the relics of tradition and regimentation. A change in thinking has been specifically identified as critically essential in nursing and midwifery for both of them to move forward with vision and determination.

The phenomenological study refuted the stereotype of the routinised nurse and midwife dependent on others for role and function. Instead a vibrant group of open-minded, inquiring, determined, confident, imaginative and self-assured individuals expressed their propensity for creativity personally and professionally.

This research also showed unexpectedly, clearly expressed differences between nurses and midwives in terms of how they interpret and actualise their roles and practice, and their relationships with patients and women. The distinctions indicated should be used as a basis for esteeming both professions with mutual respect and acknowledgment to resolve the disputation that midwifery belongs to nursing.

The grounded theory inquiry enabled the generation of a theory for practice - Opus Theory - that actually culminates in creativity. Opus Theory presents a vital, new vision for the education of nursing and midwifery students. As well it provides an exciting and very necessary opportunity for nurses and midwives to re-view their roles and extend themselves beyond the regressive status quo currently perceived by them to new, determined and stimulating destinies of strength and invigoration.

An additional challenge from this research is to project a much-needed new and exciting image of midwives and nurses as dynamic and innovative individuals engaged in distinctive professions that offer significant potential for creativity and originality.