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‘BEING SAFE’
IN CHILDBIRTH:
A hermeneutic interpretation of the narratives
of women and practitioners

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ABSTRACT

This study uncovers the meaning of 'being safe' related to the experience of childbirth, from the perspectives of practitioners (midwives and doctors), and women. It is informed by the philosophies of Heidegger and Gadamer. Stories and thoughts of the participants are offered to uncover the taken-for-granted nature of the experience of 'being safe' and to expose possible meanings in a new way.

The findings of this thesis are that 'being safe' dwells in vulnerability. There are possibilities of unsafety that are beyond human or technological control. There is however a distinctive spirit of practice that promotes safe care. It brings wisdom of learning and experience, alertness to the situation of 'now', and anticipation of problems that might arise. Relationships matter to the provision of safe care. Those that seek mutual understanding and that remain open and dialogical are more likely to anticipate concerns or find problems at their first showing. The setting in which practice is experienced impacts on safety, having the potential to erode or sabotage, to protect or enhance. Any questions asked in hindsight about the meaning of safety need to consider what possibilities, if any, existed for creating safe care, and what other factors influenced the situation to undermine the best intentions of those directly involved.

The study concludes by drawing attention to four worldviews which bring conflicting meanings of 'being safe'. The findings of this study show, however, that in the experience of 'being human' there is a common understanding of what it means to be safe in childbirth that reaches beyond the boundaries of worldviews. Where there is a willingness between those involved to find the shared understanding of 'being safe' that overrides the conflicting worldviews, safety is more likely to be achieved. For practitioners, to be safe is a lifetime's struggle. For women, 'being safe' can never be assumed, or taken as a sure promise. 'Being safe' will always be complex, will always be vulnerable, will always be close to danger.
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There are all those who have helped me make the space in my life to get this done. My colleagues from the Auckland Institute of Technology, Judy Kilpatrick, Jackie Gunn and the friends I work with, who have so generously ‘understood’ my needs. They have never failed to offer me their cheerful, ‘believing-in-me’ support. I thank the Maurice and Phyllis Pykel Trust for their grant which enabled me to put aside every Friday for this study. The time commitments of such a study do not go unnoticed by family and friends. I thank them, especially my parents, for understanding and being so supportive.

Sharing the journey with my fellow doctoral students has been a privilege and a joy. I thank them for their listening, their questions, their suggestions, and their encouragement. I especially thank Deb Spence, who was always only a phone call away. And finally, I thank you the reader, for whom this has been written. It is you who will breathe life into these words on paper.
POINTS OF CLARIFICATION

Writing style
This thesis takes a hermeneutic approach recognising that I am the author in dialogue with you the reader. I have tried always to make it clear when another voice is offered by the customs of referencing, following the style set out in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (1994). Italics are used for the voices of participants and also for the voice of poets. In chapter ten I have chosen to use italics to highlight the questions that have arisen from this study.

Ending each chapter
When I came to the finish of writing each chapter I let my mind, that was full of the notions of the chapter, yield to the freedom of poetry. It seemed in keeping with the spirit of interpretive phenomenology. The poetry becomes the dwelling place of the tentative new insights. It reveals the connections. It leaves open the questions not yet answered. It tries to speak the language where the meaning arrives at a new place.

Naming the participants
I have broken from the custom of referring to participants by a pseudonym. I experienced a reluctance to call these people by names which were not their own. I have referenced the practitioners’ stories with an alphabetical letter representing the order in which I interviewed them. I have not referenced the woman’s stories at all. This is to protect their anonymity by preventing the reader from piecing together the stories from the same woman, with the chance that they might then identify her or her practitioner. I believe that the data moves beyond the story of a particular woman, to become a story that might belong to any woman. In seeking to bridge the dialectic tension of a story being both unique and universal it seems there is no longer a need to cling to pseudo-identity. The consequence of not referencing stories with names is that I have no name to bring to the discussion. Therefore, I ask you to accept that ‘this woman’, ‘this doctor’ or ‘this midwife’ always refers to the participant whose data is the focus of the discussion.
The meaning of words

It is important that I clarify the meaning I give to key words in this study. ‘Childbirth’ is used to encompass the whole of the experience from conception to the early days of the mother/baby experience. ‘Practice’ is similarly used as an umbrella term encompassing the work of midwives, doctors, and any other health professionals. ‘Practitioner’ is used to refer to both midwives and doctors. ‘The practice setting’ refers to any place where maternity care is offered. ‘Woman’ is used to identify a woman who is, or has been, a consumer of the maternity services. I have deliberately chosen broad defining terms to facilitate an openness. Specifying holds the danger of creating barriers, of not letting us see where commonness lies.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................... ii  
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ......................................................................................... iii  
POINTS OF CLARIFICATION ............................................................................... iv  

CHAPTER ONE: BEGINNING IN THE MIDST  
- Beginning to uncover the meaning of ‘being safe’ ........................................ 1  
- The impetus for this study ............................................................................. 3  
- The questions, and the philosophical approach ........................................... 4  
- The context I bring to ‘questioning’ ............................................................. 6  

DESCRIPTING THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY .................................................. 10  
- Influences on changing expectations .......................................................... 10  
- Individualising birth .................................................................................... 12  
- What of the midwives and doctors? ............................................................... 14  
- Translating the times into a philosophical approach ..................................... 18  
- What of the places of birth? ....................................................................... 20  
- The global trends of the western world ....................................................... 23  
- Tensions and conflicts .................................................................................. 24  
- The context of ‘being safe’ .......................................................................... 25  
- Reflection: ‘They came to the world’ ........................................................... 27  

CHAPTER TWO: THE HISTORY OF BEING SAFE .............................................. 28  
- Childbirth in Colonial New Zealand ............................................................ 28  
- The coming of safety ................................................................................... 31  
- Establishing safe practitioners .................................................................... 32  
- Defining and controlling safe care ............................................................... 33  
- Safety is more than knowing about asepsis ................................................. 34  
- Knowing but not doing ............................................................................... 36  
- Becoming safe yet being powerless ............................................................. 37  
- Taking on the responsibility of safety .......................................................... 38  
- Technology means being safer ................................................................... 39  
- To do or not to do? - that is the question .................................................... 40  
- Being safe in anticipation ........................................................................... 41  
- Where are the Maori women? .................................................................... 42  
- Having a new key to safe practice, but not using it ..................................... 42  
- Safety for whom? ....................................................................................... 43  
- Decreeing the safe practitioners .................................................................. 44  
- The responsibility of the woman and her family ........................................... 45  
- The paradox of being, or not being, responsible ........................................ 45  
- Hospital - the safe place of birth ................................................................. 46  
- What matters most? .................................................................................... 47  
- Routines and rituals ..................................................................................... 48  
- Parents speak out ........................................................................................ 49  
- Full circles ................................................................................................... 51  
- The political climate of change ................................................................... 52  
- The unmasking of power .............................................................................. 53  
- Childbirth and choice ................................................................................... 54  
- The changeless, changing meaning of ‘being safe’ ....................................... 54
CHAPTER THREE: EXPLORING THE LITERATURE ................................................................................................................................. 58

The meaning of being safe in childbirth, from where it speaks the loudest ...................................................................................... 58

THE MEANING OF BEING SAFE FROM THE INDUSTRIALISED WORLD ........................................................................................................... 60

To be ‘at risk’ ....................................................................................................................................................................................... 60
Whose risk? ......................................................................................................................................................................................... 62
Who determines the meaning of risk? ............................................................................................................................................. 62
The grounding of meaning .................................................................................................................................................................... 64
Uncovering the meaning of being safe ........................................................................................................................................... 65
Naming ways of being safe ................................................................................................................................................................. 66
The tensions of being safe .................................................................................................................................................................... 66
What matters most? ................................................................................................................................................................................ 67
Is being competent being safe? ............................................................................................................................................................ 68
Proving safe ......................................................................................................................................................................................... 69
Practising from proof? .......................................................................................................................................................................... 70
What needs to be proved? ................................................................................................................................................................. 71
The role of proof in keeping the practitioner safe ................................................................................................................................ 72
The meaning of ‘being safe’ for the woman ....................................................................................................................................... 73
A comprehensive defining of safety .................................................................................................................................................. 74
A definition of meaning: from a fundamental perspective ............................................................................................................ 75
So how does the literature declare the meaning of being safe? ......................................................................................................... 76

CHAPTER FOUR: PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH .............................................................................................................................. 78

What are the foundations of the philosophical underpinnings? ....................................................................................................... 78
How has my own horizon of understanding been influenced? ......................................................................................................... 79

THE UNDERSTANDINGS I HAVE COME TO ........................................................................................................................................ 80

What is a phenomenon? .................................................................................................................................................................... 80
What is the meaning of ‘being’? .......................................................................................................................................................... 81
What is the meaning of ‘being there’? ............................................................................................................................................... 82
Where is meaning found? ................................................................................................................................................................... 83
What is the meaning of ‘being-with-one-another’? ............................................................................................................................ 84
How do we understand? ...................................................................................................................................................................... 85
What is truth? ...................................................................................................................................................................................... 85
Adding the philosophical thoughts of Gadamer? .................................................................................................................................... 86
What is prejudice? ................................................................................................................................................................................ 87
How do we ‘interpret’? ....................................................................................................................................................................... 87
How do interpretations differ? .......................................................................................................................................................... 88
What are our horizons? ...................................................................................................................................................................... 88
How do we ask hermeneutical questions? ......................................................................................................................................... 89
How do we interpret text? ................................................................................................................................................................ 89
Who does the understanding belong to? ............................................................................................................................................ 90
How does language relate to meaning? ............................................................................................................................................... 91
What is the role of ‘words on paper’? .............................................................................................................................................. 92
How is thinking evoked? ................................................................................................................................................................... 93
What is the hermeneutic circle? ........................................................................................................................................................ 94
The political challenge to meaning .................................................................................................................................................... 94

Reflection: ‘Being is already’ ............................................................................................................................................................. 97
CHAPTER FIVE: THE HAPPENING OF THIS STUDY

The coming together of philosophy and method ........................................... 98
How did I come to understand? ................................................................. 99
How did I learn? ....................................................................................... 100
How can such a method be equated with rigour? .................................. 101
What are the criteria of trustworthiness that I put before myself? .... 102
The question still remains: can you trust this work? ......................... 103

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE SPIRIT OF PRACTICE ........................................... 118

Heideggerian underpinnings ................................................................. 119
Defining the spirit of safe practice ......................................................... 128
Knowing ............................................................................................... 137
The believing about practice ................................................................. 146
Ways of practice: ................................................................................... 147
Watching ................................................................................................. 148
Anticipating ............................................................................................ 148
Doing ...................................................................................................... 149
Doing just because ................................................................................ 150
Reflecting ............................................................................................... 151
Judgement-making .............................................................................. 153
Being-in-the-world-of-practice .............................................................. 156
CHAPTER EIGHT: RELATING ................................................................. 163
    Heideggerian Underpinnings ................................................... 163
    Intimate they-self relationship ............................................... 166
    The imposition of the relationship of technology .......................... 169
    The woman-practitioner relationship ........................................ 171
    The tension within solicitude .................................................. 173
    The possibilities of relationships ............................................. 174
    Viewpoints on knowing what is safe ......................................... 177
    Practitioners relating with practitioners .................................... 180
    Relating to unknown others .................................................... 184
    The woman, relating to the unknown self .................................... 185
    So what has ‘relating’ got to do with ‘being safe’? ....................... 187
Reflection: Hello, how’s it going? ............................................... 189

CHAPTER NINE: BREAKDOWN ............................................................. 190
    Heideggerian Underpinnings .................................................... 190
    Breakdown in thrownness ....................................................... 192
    Breakdown in the spirit of practice .......................................... 195
    Breakdown in relationship from the woman’s perspective ............... 199
    Breakdown in relationship from a midwife’s perspective ................ 203
    Breakdown in dual relationship .............................................. 205
    Inter-professional breakdown .................................................. 206
    Breakdown in relationship with technology .................................. 208
    Breakdown in the things that hardly seem to matter ...................... 209
    Breakdown in institutional care .............................................. 212
    Breakdown in feeling safe ..................................................... 214
    Breakdown leading to catastrophe ............................................ 216
    How does breakdown happen? .................................................. 222
Reflection: Breakdown ................................................................. 224

CHAPTER TEN: THE MEANING OF BEING SAFE ..................................... 225
    The spirit of practice ......................................................... 225
        Time past ........................................................................ 226
        Time present .................................................................... 227
        Time future ..................................................................... 229
        Being and practice .......................................................... 230
    Relationships ........................................................................ 231
    The world of practice ............................................................. 235
    Thrownness .......................................................................... 239
    What are the implications for practice? ...................................... 240
    What are the implications for education? .................................... 241
    What are the implications for judging safe practice? .................... 242
    The questions highlight the need for more research .................... 245
    Limitations of this study and opportunities for further research ....... 246
    What is the meaning of ‘being safe’? ......................................... 248
    In a nutshell ................................................................. 249

What is the spirit of practice? ...................................................... 160
Reflection: ‘The spirit of practice’ ................................................ 162
Reflection: ‘The silence is mine, and is yours’ .......................................................... 251

CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE COMMON GROUND OF MEANING ................................. 252
  What is the difference between a worldview and a phenomenon? .................. 252
  What do we bring to the common ground? ...................................................... 253
  The scientific rational meaning of being safe .............................................. 253
  The social-traditional meaning of being safe .............................................. 256
  The neo-romantic meaning of being safe .................................................... 259
  The common ground ............................................................................. 261
  Postmodern-ironist meanings of being safe .............................................. 262
  Hearing in the stillness ........................................................................ 266
  The end is where we start from ................................................................. 269
Reflection: being safe .............................................................................. 271

Appendix A  Masters Thesis information sheet and consent form .................. 272
Appendix B  Doctoral Thesis information sheet and consent form .................. 275
Appendix C  Letter to practitioner participants on transfer to doctoral study .... 278

REFERENCES ............................................................................................ 280