**Book Review**

*Childbirth: Midwifery and Concepts of Time*

Reviewed by Lesley Page

Time in the modern world is a commodity, sold, bought, rationed, raced against, and compartmentalised. Chronological linear time marks and dominates our lives. Yet, as we all know, time can be endless, eternal. Time can race, stand still, or slip away. The subjective experience of time denies the objective measurement of time by the ticking of the clock. Often, when with a woman in labour, I have felt the timelessness of the rhythms: the apparently endless repetitions. Yet, when filling in the partogram or when timing contractions I am amazed by how quickly time has passed.

Time is the stuff of our lives and is the focus of the journey on which the book *Childbirth* takes us. The marking and management of time is a part of every culture, and can be used in such a way that it limits and controls and generates risks, or in the boundless way that allows holistic care to be given.

Modern maternity care is characterised by rigid boundaries. Boundaries around the duration of labour, the length of pregnancy, expectations of a mechanistic, clockwork progress may increase risk rather than reducing it. But these boundaries also reduce the possibility of the transformation that birth may bring to everyone. Mothers living in our ‘time starved’ culture often feel conflict between the need for slow time to feed and get to know and bond with their babies, and the need to make the fundamental adjustments to motherhood.

In this fascinating, scholarly, and readable book the authors take us into our familiar worlds and make them strange, with the result that we can see clearly, with fresh, critical, and creative eyes, what goes on in our everyday world. Each of the chapters helps us see how differently time can be experienced and framed.

The study of time is linked to an understanding of the way that the culture and conduct of childbirth are always social, even, perhaps especially, in the apparently more scientific and technical worlds of modern hospital based systems. The chapters in the book demonstrate how anthropology can be used to improve health care. The methodologically rigorous studies reported take the reader into a number of different worlds. They are linked with insightful and sophisticated analysis and interpretation, particularly by the editor of the book.

The book is engaging and thought provoking. Not only does it take us on a journey through time, showing the way time can be limited and can limit the safety and experience of childbirth and midwifery, but also illuminating the way time can lead to the transformative relationships and spaces of attending, of waiting on women and their babies, of the relationships between mothers and fathers and partners and families and babies.

As I read the book I found myself engaged in an internal ‘yes, but’ dialogue. Aware of the conflict between the dominant time-managed culture and the need for an awareness of physiological and psychological time I kept wondering how the two could be brought together.

But as the book unfolds it describes and demonstrates ways that time can be found and allowed for in different organisations, approaches, and attitudes.

There has never been a more important time, not only for professionals, but also for society as a whole, to stand back and understand the world of childbirth. The increase of caesarean birth to over a quarter of the population in most of the economically, but also in some of the less economically developed world, and the reduction of straightforward birth to a minority, has become familiar. It is high time to stop taking this for granted. *Childbirth* will help anyone reading it challenge what is happening; also it provides insight into methodology and the importance of anthropology in helping us to understand and to engage in critical reconstruction of the way maternity is approached.

Professor Lesley Page is visiting professor in midwifery at King’s College London, University of Technology Sydney, and University of Sydney. Lesley has had many years of clinical practice, management, and academic work in the U.K. and Canada, and has been a member of three national committees on maternity services. She has lectured around the world on midwifery and maternity care, has many publications, and has her own continuing practice.