

Dissolving the Solid Body


An Ethnography of Birthing in an Australian Public Hospital

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Abstract

Based on ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in the maternity unit of an urban Australian public hospital, this thesis explores metaphors derived from material density as major ordering principles in western understandings of the world, and argues that logics of solidity and fluidity underpin lines of contestation in scientific, academic, and biomedical/health discourses.

Through an exploration of social and scientific understandings of the human body, the thesis argues that the body as a fluid, dynamic phenomenon is frequently understood, in biomedical culture, through a logic that is inherently 'solid'. Solid logic is privileged over fluid logic in hospital environments, which has particular consequences for maternity and birthing care.

While medicalised birthing has contributed to improvements in maternal and infant safety and well-being across the western world, inappropriately medicalised birth can be both traumatising and iatrogenic. Feminist contestations to the medicalisation of pregnancy and birth, and obstetric resistance to these contestations, can be seen as contestations between epistemologies centered on (more) fluid or (more) solid understandings of the world.

Risk management is shown to be reliant on strategies of material and symbolic solidification, often to the detriment of the inherent fluidity of the maternal body. Constructions of individual autonomy rely on the construction of a bounded body that is often in contradiction with experienced biological corporeality. The thesis argues that fluid logic offers space for maternal corporeality, however the individual autonomy required by the western health consumer is only achievable within a framework of solid logic.

Ethnographic engagement with pregnant and birthing women, their partners and families, midwives, obstetricians and other hospital professionals allows for an analysis of embodied and discursive beliefs and practices. The rich complexities of technologised birthing are highlighted in explorations of clinical encounters and key decision making moments in birthing and maternity care.