

The Anthropological Aspects of Childbirth: The Pain

Lucio Zichella

Rome, Italy

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Abstract: The biological and theoretical puzzle of uterine pain in childbirth remain unsolved. The reading of the Old and New Testament does not explain if the pain derive by uterine contractility or by the anguish to deliver out of the terrestrial Paradise. The uterine contractility has to be conscious to allow the mother to reach the right place to protect the fetus lacking baby, as the most autonomous, for a long time after the birth living being of the primate. The meaning of pain in general is not yet defined. The emotional component of pain seems to be prevalent. The role of pain in defense mechanism seems to be unquestionable. Defense mechanism in labour from what? Why the component of pain become prevalent in the consciousness of uterine contractility in the human being? The anthropological approach to the problem from the very beginning of human being until now I think could be very helpful.

Zusammenfassung: *Anthropologische Aspekte der Geburt: Der Schmerz.* Das biologische und theoretische Puzzle der Untersuchung des Gebärmutter Schmerzes bei der Geburt des Kindes ist ein ungelöstes Problem. Die Lektüre des Alten oder Neuen Testaments lehrt nicht, ob der Schmerz von der Kontraktion der Gebärmutter herrührt oder von der Enge bei der Entbindung aus dem uterinen Paradies. Der Kontraktionsschmerz der Gebärmutter muß bewußt sein, damit die Mutter sich in der richtigen Weise auf den Schutz ihres hilflosen Babys einstellen kann, das noch für lange Zeit nach der Geburt das hilfloseste Wesen in der Familie der Primaten ist. Die allgemeine Bedeutung von Schmerz ist bis jetzt noch nicht definiert. Die emotionalen Aspekte des Schmerzes scheinen von besonderer Bedeutung. Die Abwehrbedeutung des Schmerzes scheint nicht in Frage zu stellen zu sein. Abwehr in Bezug auf was? Warum hat der Aspekt des Schmerzes in der Wahrnehmung der Kontraktion der Gebärmutter beim Menschen eine solche Bedeutung? Ich denke, daß die anthropologische Herangehensweise an das Problem von Beginn der Menschheitsgeschichte bis jetzt hilfreich sein kann.

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Correspondence to: Lucio Zichella, Policlinico Umberto 1, Viale del Policlinico 155, 00161 Roma, Italy, email zichella@unirome1.it, zichella@myrealbox.com

Bearing in mind the evolution of the philosophy of science we can see how medicine clearly needs to have a broader interdisciplinary approach, for which modern anthropology, viewed as image and/or as a science of human being, seems to offer, doubtlessly, the most appropriate model of analysis.

The complexity of human reproduction, which biologically and culturally expresses itself through fertility and its control, through pregnancy, birth, nurturing, binding, paternal role, finds in anthropology, as I have already pointed out elsewhere (Zichella 1999) the ideal stage where to confront all the biological, psychobiological, psychological, behavioural, social and cultural components which play a part therein.

It seems legitimate to me to re-examine the question previously examined in a congress of psychosomatic held in Italy (Zichella, in press), of pain during labour: this biological absurdity, which seems to find an interpretation and a justification only in a few verses of the Old and New Testament.

Childbirth, the most physiological event in nature, positive in regards to illness and death, is experienced and expressed as a painful fact.

Considering that there is neither analogy nor absolute correspondence between pain and illness, the natural and existential meaning of pain is, as is known, still an unresolved problem. Interpreted mainly as an emotional expression, through different level of affectivity, from the basic instincts to the highest levels of sentimental and spiritual expression, pain is essentially a crucial human experience. As has recently been documented, in therapy responds both to specific medicines and to placebos: an intriguing fact for positivistic medicine based upon evidence.

Allowing for certain individual and cultural differences, during labour the contractile activity of the uterus, perceived above certain levels of intensity, is commonly considered and referred to as pain. The contractile activity, assimilated to labour pain under the semantic profile is, in reality, an expression of a fundamental psychobiological necessity: a signal of the beginning and of the process of childbirth, a signal whose aim is to assure the presence of appropriate behavioural and environmental conditions for the well being of the mother and for the survival of the child.

This necessity is already in the Holy Scriptures in the narration of the pressing "pains" endured by Mary and in her request to Joseph to find the environment for the event in a protected place where the breath of the ox and of the donkey by change guaranteed, as a natural incubator, the necessary protection for Jesus in the first moments of his life.

The cultural anthropological view of the conscious perception of the uterine contraction, from its emotional and affective character and value to the pain of the contraction can, probably, be traced through the history of human reproduction, back to the very beginnings, as an expression of the mother's need to protect herself and her child.

The human neonate is, in fact, the least protected in nature and, so, the most exposed to environmental dangers and aggressions (physical and animal) for a prolonged period of time, up to adolescence, when it will, finally, gain physical, behavioural and social autonomy.

These considerations are at the bases of Gehlen's (1940) anthropological theorizations on the human adventure, of which the biology of reproduction represents

an essential premise. Gehlen had published his masterpiece, *Man, his Nature and his Place in the World*, in the first half of the last century. A project on an empirically and philosophically founded anthropology which proposes, through the phenomenology of human existence, an extremely interesting theoretical synthesis. With in mind this reality, so acutely expressed in Gehlen's philosophical anthropology, it is not improbable to think that in the wakes of time a painful affective characterization of the uterine contraction was developed as an expression of anguish and as a request for protection on behalf of the woman. Human maternity is, not only due to the peculiarity of the presence of pain in childbirth, a complex function owing to the influence of numerous external elements on the biological configuration of this function in its psychobiological and behavioural articulations.

A holistic approach to the understanding and, therefore, to the total protection of the mother and her child and of their relationship during pregnancy, during birth and after birth, calls for an appropriate theoretical and analytical model. In spite of the uncertainties that ensue from any categorizations relative to human beings owing to their integrated dimension, anthropological knowledge meets the necessities of the numerous elements characteristic of maternity (biological, psychobiological, behavioural, psychological, sociological, cultural), bringing dualisms to an analysis of equal dignity and to an interdisciplinary approach without unilateral and sectorial views.

Understood essentially as a science and as image of man, anthropology is the highest expression of a necessary process of integration and synthesis that a complex event such as maternity requires.

Initially accused of colonialism, during the 18th century anthropology first branches into physical, cultural and structural anthropology, then, later it is distinguished from ethnology, interested more specifically in the study of primitive societies and, finally, it expands into a scientific concept and image of mankind.

As a maximum expression of the intellectual adventure of mankind, epistemology too calls to anthropology to redefine the limits and the goals of knowledge (Elkana 1999). During the course of his evolution man is the product of his biological potential and of his environment, but also of his history and of his culture.

The study of behavioural determinants in primary biological events (birth, nutrition, reproduction, death) and, above all, of the reactions to these determinants may, probably, be furthered by anthropology. Specific aspects of human reproduction, differentiated from those of other living beings of the superior biological scale, may be psycho-emotional and psychosocial expressions of adaptation to environmental requirements.

Pain in humans is in general a crucial existential experience with interaction and integration between man and the environment, aiming at survival. Anthropology defines interaction and integration between mankind and environment as existential and therefore essential. From a neuropsychological perspective pain is essentially viewed as an emotion.

According to Sartre (1939) an emotion is a relational mode between a subject and the world and it belongs not so much to psychophysiology (or physiopathology) as to the anthropology of relations and of meanings; an aspect of the sensitivity of symbolism. Painful emotion presents different forms and evolve into three funda-

mental phases which are psychologically and physiologically distinct: perception, comment, amortization. Emotions are expressed through a filter of individual affectivity, the power of subjective appreciation which through its own means and meaning probably represents the fundamental existential corner stone “pivot de l’être au monde”. (Quartic and Renaud 1972)

The emotional-affective component can appear even in the perceptive phase, so that a sensation may be perceived as pain right from the beginning. The notion of emotion indicates an unfavourable situation for mechanisms of amortization: probably on an individual and cultural bases. A painful sensation is, therefore, a phenomenon of superior nervous integration (Soulerac 1968) “an affective reaction, capable of being appropriate for many external and internal sensorial messages, of sufficient intensity to reach a behavioural level. Sensorial messages of conscious uterine contraction correspond to primary needs of protection; They solicit adequate behavioural reactions, generated by basic emotions – according to McLean’s general conceptualisation : for women (self preservation drive) and for the reproductive function (preservation of species drive), which are usually agonistic in maternity, even if in a dynamic relationship, but at times antagonistic. The affective filter of emotions, presents different levels of integration, from the lowest levels of inferior affectivity, which is identified in basic emotions, to the highest levels, which comprise the most elaborate human feelings.

With in mind structural anthropology we can imagine that through time the risks for the mother and for her child may have solicited for a request of adaptation an affective attitude of alarm.

Affective appraisal may come from the external cultural and social environment (hetero-affectivity) or from the psychological or psychobiological environment of the pregnant woman (auto-affectivity), at different levels of consciousness. According to Melzack (1965) it has been proved that in the superior species pain is not simply a function of only damage and that the intensity and the quality of pain are conditioned by previous experiences and by the ability to understand the cause of pain. The culture in which we grow has an essential role on hoe we fell pain and how we react to it. Melzack also affirms that stimuli which produce pain intolerable to some may be tolerated by others without a single word on it.

The perception of pain, therefore, cannot can not be defined through particular types of stimuli (Melzack 1973), but it is, rather, a highly personal experience which depends greatly on educational and cultural meanings accorded to a situation as well as to other factors, which are unique to each individual. Considering the complexity of the study of the psychological components of pain on an individual and cultural bases, stressed by Melzack, it is, however, evident that labour pain is an instrument of intrapersonal and interpersonal social and cultural communication.

The conscious appreciation of labour “pain” may be understood as a signal and as a defensive behavioural function: the organization of the means of defence requested by the woman, for herself and for her child, through the emotional alarm, as a factor that will allow her to face the great existential event. The total suppression of “pain” or, rather, of the conscious contraction, should be seen in this perspective.

The basic relationship psyche-soma (emotion-function) is rendered even more particular during pregnancy by the presence of a third factor: the foetus, an obliged

factor of the psychobiological and, also of the psycho-emotional dynamics of the complex reality of maternity and birth. At the basic level of reproduction nature has provided active behavioural mechanisms of protection for the individual, but, above all, of protection of the function and of its result: the self preservation drive and the preservation of species are, as has already been pointed out, primordial instinctual mechanisms, basic emotions of homeostatic adaptation and behaviour in a usually dynamic agonistic but potentially antagonistic relationship; think of the effect of natural calamities on the increase of infertility or of interrupted pregnancies in animals. Although nature does not step back from its imperative on the preservation of species at all levels of the biological scale, including mankind, when environmental conditions – physical, meteorological, social (couple, family, society) – or the request for adaptation force the individual to privilege himself rather than the offspring, the affective quality or hue of the event and of behaviour in an antagonistic sense.

In humans the two primordial instincts may gradually evolve into ever superior affective relations, from their basic dimensions, to superior states of consciousness, where sentiments confront each other at a spiritual dimension. Relevant attitudes in some experiences of heroic maternity, where the defence of the offspring was privileged respect to one's own survival, have been observed.

Cultural and socio-environmental aspects, in a way more external to the psychobiological dynamics of the function, may tinge affectively the perception of uterine contraction and, an emblematic example may be found in the recent past in unmarried mothers, when this situation did not represented a quest for female autonomy. Today this autonomy is, at times, expressed in a voluntary paternal anonymity, almost to recover a philogenetic condition in parthenogenetic reproduction of the lower levels of the biological scale, which is today surprisingly attainable through the manipulation of nature, through cloning. In situations of unwed mothers there could be two distinctive behaviours at the moment of birth: either a total absence of affection and/or an indifferent verbalization of the contractile activity of the uterus, which could conceal, because of the absence of habitual manifestations, the unknown presence between the legs of the baby's head, with the risk of asphyxia due to lack of appropriate assistance, or, on the other hand, a state of uncontrollable physical or verbal agitation, as an expression of panic or great suffering: essentially, in the first case, we had a sense of guilt, in the second, a sense of terror towards any possible judgement from society.

The project of a regression, through self-hypnosis, to the basic conditions by re-experiencing one's own birth is theoretically acceptable and technically possible as a process of recovering of basic conditions freed from superstructures (Scardino 1998); Group psychology associated with self-hypnosis represents, within certain terms, a social verification of the emotional aspects of the event of birth.

If through the appropriate instruments of hypnosis, group psychology, experience as a cultural verification and a brief narration of self disclosure of the subject it is possible to decode the messages which maternity and its subjects – the mother and the child – send inside and outside the system, by recovering a natural integrated dimension at the highest spiritual levels, we may try to exit the perverse circuit which could damage the experience and the memory of child-

birth, with possible repercussions on the health of the relationship mother-child, mother-child-father in the new family.

A new way of thinking has spread in the domain of Post-structuralism, the so called social construction of reality (Kuipers 1989): the world we live in is structured largely by the forces of human culture, including language, myth and ideology (Morris 1998).

Pain seems a fundamental aspect of primitive ontological cultural adaptation to birth in humans, today the deconstruction of pain from the contraction should lead back to the reacquisition of the primary reason of the conscious contraction. The constructionist theory leads to the role of possible ancestral models: on the bases of historical, socio-cultural and scientific mutations, in the construction of reality man finds himself today in the position to sketch a reality which is in some way considered as definitive (Hacking 1999). To take away the logos, understood as the universal law, responds to modern philosophical principles, which have already been pointed out by Heidegger when he relativizes the being to various historical periods. More categorically, Derrida, with his anti-logocentrism, disowns the determinist background through decontextualization and deconstruction. We may also refer to the role of language as a constructive element as an element of consciousness: pain and labour contractions have in practice always been assimilable to the same meaning.

We are confronted with a reality that is difficult to deconstruct, but whose deconstruction could offer a re-analysis of to the biological wisdom of nature and, in medical terms, satisfaction to the prerequisites for the definition of the physiology of a function, which, in my opinion, deserves serious interdisciplinary consideration in an anthropological perspective.

Pain defined as a subjective emotion of its reality can not be approached only by positivistic science. It was philosophy's duty, according to Comte, father of positivism, to transform human sciences, including psychology and sociology and, today, we may add anthropology, into positive sciences. Bergson points out that the life of consciousness is not describable in mathematical terms.

Dilthey in contrast tries to create an epistemology of human sciences, affirming that the sciences of the spirit, where we may include the vast matter of the present analysis, are not always assimilable to sciences of nature and to their statistical-mathematical methods of evaluation. Here we have the first ambiguity regarding the concept of nature and the fact that man is, owing to his biological components and to all the other components, dichotomized between science of nature and the sciences of the spirit. In its quest for authenticity, existentialism affirms through Jasper's words that "man in situation", in his existential reality, is never captured by scientific knowingness. In the same flow Heidegger poses the problem of existing and of the sense of being: existence is a project, an opening to the future, a memory, hope, fright, anguish. It is, therefore, necessary to think of another concept of being, a more ample one than the scientific knowingness model that dominates our mentality. Nietzsche and Freud also comment the critic of objective truth. The human being can not be perceived in objective terms or calculated. The deconstruction of the inner world; truth as a game of interpretation; the claim for innerness – against the claims of science and of values that

consider themselves founded on facts, are some more critical considerations of the dominant positivistic thought in science.

In the dualism between spirit and nature, between understanding and explaining what is the reality of labour pain in a natural and, therefore, physiological event? Awareness of the problematic relationship between systems of formal truths, mathematical logics and experience of the external world develops after positivism, only in neo-positivism or logical empiricism, which, like positivism, denies metaphysics, but opens to a new analysis of the above mentioned problems. To my mind the position of the Viennese Circle, mainly positivistic in its affirmation that the truth of one proposition is not so much in its correspondence to the actual fact, but, rather, to the coherence with a system of rules, can be fully shared; its flaw is that it refers to the basic language of physics for verification: Wittgenstein, related to the Viennese Circle, partially affirmed that the language of physics is not the only one endowed with sense.

Experience as reality responds to principles which have been constantly improved through empiricism, positivism, neo-positivism and logical empiricism, however, the bond with rigid mathematical-statistical models or laws of physics has not allowed for answers to the configuration of human problems, which are more easily defined in the context of complexity. The critic to positivism fossilized in maintaining a dualism (spirit-nature, mind-body, explain-comprehend) which, although dynamic, did not offer any prospective towards a global solution of the problems. The close interconnections between culture and nature have today, in fact, reduced the categorical dualistic Cartesian concepts to a complex interaction for which there is a hypothesis of a more appropriate methodology of epistemological approach.

Coherence, as in the Viennese Circle, to a system of rules is that a physiological event, such as childbirth, can not be painful and, therefore, characterized by a negative affective emotion if it is not pathological. An eventual transition of an event from a physiological connotation to a pathological one can be found in the post modern conceptualisation of a relationship between biomedicine and bio-culture (Morris 1998).

The post-modern puts the emphasis on the need for a more profound investigation of the relationship between biology and culture, nature and culture. We agree with Galimberti's (1992) definition of culture: complex of human knowledge, beliefs, behavioural modes, concepts and expectations. It is not just a case that ever since Taylor (1871) cultural anthropology appropriates itself of culture. The problem is confirmed by Kluckhohn and Roether (1952) when they report 200 different definitions of the term culture. The criteria underlying the various definitions of culture are, according to Galimberti, eight: descriptive, historical, nominative, psychological, structural, dynamic, psychoanalytic, sociological.

Today science, which has discussed over the dualism nature culture, in a more advanced epistemological vision, tends to give nature and culture a joint role and to attribute to each a part of the truth. The bio-cultural model is not new, biomedical medicine has practically buried the memory of pre-scientific ancestors (Morris 1998). The bio-cultural model does not adjust to a Cartesian system, which resolutely opposes science to superstition, knowledge to error, fact to supposition, the body to the mind. It seems strange that today the remarkable role of culture on

health, on illness and on disease has been stressed as a post-modern philosophical thought, questioned for its vagueness, while in my opinion, it represents a strong reaction to a rigid rationalism, which wrecked on the dogmatic principles of empiricism, in the hands of an unquestionable champion of analytic thought (Quine), who died at the end of the last century. Disease is an objectively verified disorder, illness is a subjective experience of discomfort; Illness (we may include here labour pain) in post-modern challenge is no longer a pure biological state, an ugly fact of nature, but, rather, something created and interpreted by culture.

Human reality belongs to anthropology, as a science of man and is founded upon experience of existential evolution of the human being in the external world. In *Anthropology of Knowledge* Elkana (1999) accords to the complexity of human problems, among which we may include childbirth, the benefit of different levels of truth, giving equal value to "nature" and to the "spirit", thus overcoming the bonds of dualism.

Considering hermeneutics as a more perspective instrument which confronts new paradigms and new ways of naming things, Antiseri (Reale and Antiseri 2001) prefers it to epistemology, a thought which strives to resolve problems within consolidated paradigms and modes of organizing experience. In the spirit of the Hermetics approach to human problems and experiences we have the duty to understand the real meaning of pain in the psychobiological aspects of childbirth.

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