

## Newcastle University Vacation Scholarship 2013 Student-led research in medical sociology: a study of stillbirth

### BACKGROUND IN THE DISCIPLINE

It is only recently that the sociology of death and dying has begun to grow as a discipline as it marks the end of an individual's participation within the social world and therefore lies outside of sociology's main concerns (Giddens 2009). As well as relevance to the subject, death and dying is often seen as 'taboo' and not a topic of polite conversation to be discussed within academia.

Stillbirth is a topic that is often missed from sociological understandings of death and dying. Although it is technically a form of death, there is something that seems even more tragic about the death of a fetus before it has engaged in any form of life in the social world.

### DEFINING THE ISSUE

The current legal definition for stillbirth in the UK, provided by the 'Stillbirth (Definition) Act of 1992' states that a stillbirth is "a child which has issued forth from its mother after the 24th week of pregnancy and which did not at any time breathe or show any other signs of life." The definition of stillbirth was altered in 1992 from a child born after 28 weeks, to 24 weeks (Stillbirth (Definition) Act, 1992).

### THE STUDY

This study was a student-led research project in to sociological understandings around stillbirth. The main aim within this study was to provide a better understanding of the sociology of stillbirth for other undergraduate students who may have an interest in this particular field.

The study consisted of an in-depth search in to literature on stillbirth from sociology and other disciplines within the social sciences. The relevant literature was then selected and used to create an annotated bibliography with a description and analysis of each piece. In order to make the resource as easy to use as possible the literature was thematically categorised.

#### Identity as a Mother

'Identity of the mother,' shows the ways in which women feel they are stripped of their parental identity after suffering a stillbirth

#### Identity as a Father

The second theme, 'identity of the father,' recognises a further gap in the research that focuses solely on men's experiences of stillbirth and the way their experiences and feelings are often ignored

#### Identity of the Child

Thirdly, 'memorialization' (or the identity of the child) showed the various ways in which parents attempt to create and continue an identity for their stillborn child often through monuments, memorials and the use of the Internet

#### Policy Implication

Finally, the theme of policy implication showed the ways in which studies around stillbirth are attempting to effect the way that stillbirth is approached within medical discourse, attempting to lessen the 'taboo' around the subject, to get more people talking about it and a general recognition for stillbirth

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The project was solely focused on one aspect within medical sociology: stillbirth. The main aim in this research was to produce a resource for other undergraduate sociology students that are considering completing a piece of work on the topic.

The pieces were described and analysed in an annotated bibliography providing a short and detailed explanation as to why each piece is vital to researching the area of stillbirth within medical sociology. This included using academic search engines such as Google Scholar and Web of Knowledge in order to find around fifty references that are useful within the field based on their key words and abstracts. These references were then recorded in to the citation program 'EndNote.' Twenty-five references were then picked out and read fully in order to pick out a key selection. Fourteen of these references were picked and read again in order to identify a key conceptual framework.

The annotated bibliography provided an overview of the topic, stating the facts and figures of stillbirth in the UK and globally. The main focus was on fourteen references that I had discovered through academic searches that I had read, summarised and analysed to explain the key points and pros and cons of using the piece.

The main implications for this work were to get the topic of stillbirth in to medical sociology and to provide a well-structured resource for undergraduates to utilise when approaching the subject.

### OTHER RESOURCES PRODUCED FROM THE STUDY

Another outcome of the second piece of research was a lecture and seminar outline about the sociology of stillbirth, which could be used to teach on the second year 'sociology of health and illness' module.

As well as these documents, Charlotte and I both spoke about our experiences of carrying out research as undergraduate students at the 2013 'Dissertation Conference' for Sociology Students. We spoke about useful techniques we discovered whilst doing the research, particularly 'Web of Knowledge' and 'EndNote.'



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