

Silenced Labour: Language and power in the birth room

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We all want to do things with our words; to be able to perform actions which change our moral and social relations with others. Nowhere is this more important than when we seek to use our words to grant or deny permission to others to touch, penetrate or interfere with our bodies. My research uses applied speech act theory to investigate communicative failings which occur when women and birthing people are prevented from exercising agency over their body during labour and birth.

My research focusses predominantly on the normative and illocutionary success dimensions of refusal in contexts in which positive consent is required for permissibility. In doing so, I take accounts of refusal from the sexual context and consider their applicability to the medical domain. I argue that the context of intimate touch in the medical domain presents a useful way of understanding novel dimensions of illocutionary and locutionary silencing. I show how this expanded philosophical repertoire can be applied to improve the ability of the law and healthcare practice to prevent and respond to instances of unwanted touch.