Examining Maternal Resistance Through Betterment Birthed from Chronic Stress in African American Mothers at High Risk for Infant Mortality in Cleveland, Ohio
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Introduction

African American mothers in Cleveland, OH, particularly those who have insecure housing, employment, and/or income, face enormous challenges when it comes to raising their children. Their successful mothering requires contending with the myriad effects of systemic racism: segregation that results in physical isolation, environmental hazards, and disinvestment; gut-wrenching fear of losing their children to gang violence or police brutality; and the quotidian humiliations of substandard public education, a complex and punitive welfare system, a dilapidated public transportation system. Indeed, this struggle begins well before they give birth or even conceive a child. This is evident because chronic stress in African American women is one of the dominant mechanisms for the racial disparity in the infant mortality rate: in Cleveland it is two and a half times higher for babies born of African American women than white women.

Methods:

Cuyahoga County

Objective: To understand the experience of chronic stress for pregnant and postpartum mothers living in Cleveland, OH.

Methods:

- IRB-approved nine-month qualitative study
- N=17 Medicaid-eligible African American pregnant women in Cleveland
- 103 transcribed interviews and 114 observational field notes documenting perinatal clinical encounters
- Analyzed with open-coding (Dedoose.com)

Results

Betterment: How Black mothers center their children's perspective & needs

My pregnancy has actually been very good... More excited because it's a little girl and I'm really dedicated on building a bond with her, better bond than what I had with my mom. So, I'm very excited about that. Pregnancy situation was a little negative, but I've overcome that situation so... The beginning was very rocky because I didn't know what I wanted to do. I didn't know whether I wanted to keep the baby or abort the baby. I had friends telling me to abort and I had friends telling me this was a blessing. So, I didn't know what to do. And I felt like my mind, my stability of my mind wasn't stable enough to abort a baby and like move on with my life. I just couldn't do it. So, I just said I'm going to have her! And I'm glad I did because she's a girl [laughers]. But now it's much better. I feel more calm... CP_KC_01-6-2-16

Discussion

Our data illustrate that many mothers have a painful awareness of structural racism and how it constrains and endangers their and their children's lives. With that as context, their stories of motherhood demonstrate radical acts of resistance, mainly what we termed as betterment. We constructed the term betterment as we heard the word "better" arise repeatedly: mothers wanted their baby’s life to be better than theirs, they wanted to do a better job of mothering than their parents did, or they wanted the future to be better for their children.

Betterment is the intricate overlapping of how mothers center their children's perspective and needs, how mothers reconsider their social supports and how mothers focus on the future with the goal of improving their children's life yet being cognizant of the impact of structural racism on their everyday lives.

Conclusion

These findings are significant in that they add nuance and, most importantly, it amplifies the voices of Black mothers to primary care physicians' understanding of how social determinants of health are lived and embodied by their most vulnerable patients. With this knowledge, physicians and scientists can increase their awareness so they can provide holistic quality care and better advocate for systematic changes in healthcare that can ultimately improve outcomes for and save the lives of Black mothers and babies.

Select References