

The Gap Behind the Numbers: Perspectives of African American Women on Infant Mortality

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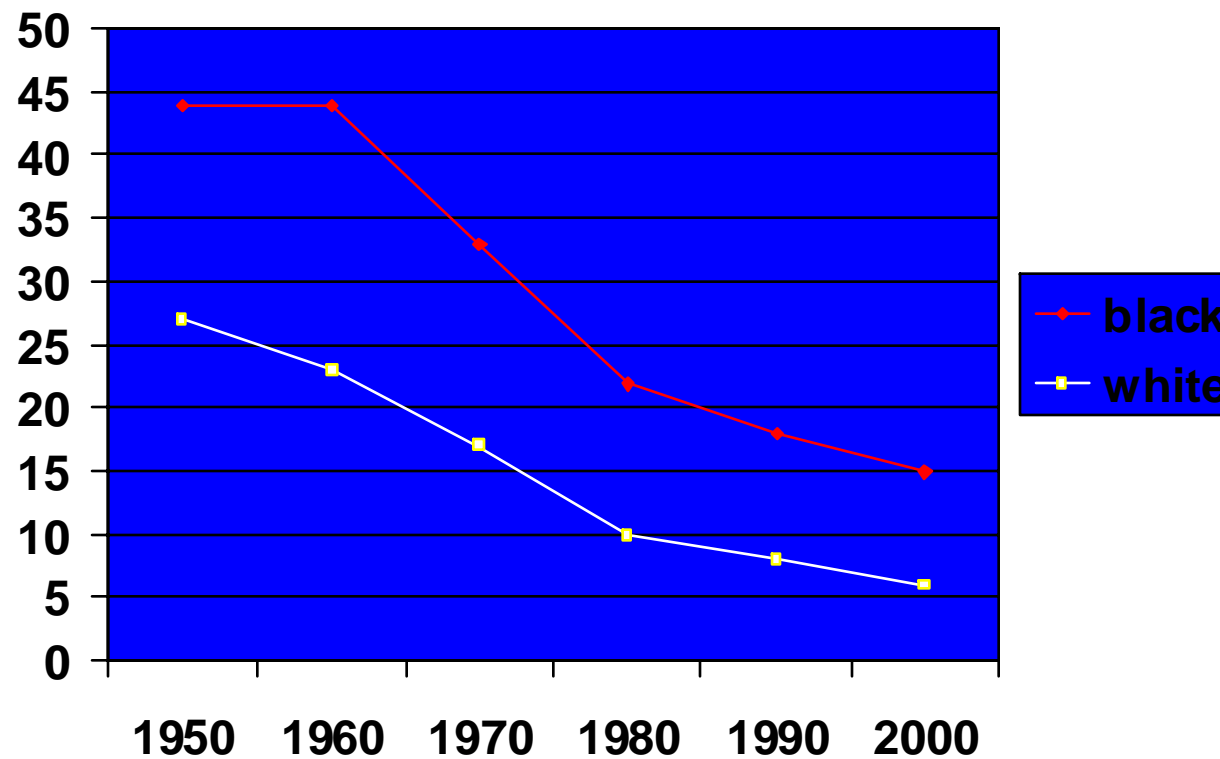
African American Infant Mortality

- The risk for black mothers is twofold that of white mothers...Black mothers have higher infant mortality rates and are more at risk for infant mortality than all other ethnic groups.
- Infant mortality is more than a dead baby...it represents complex negative medical and social events in the mother's life.

African American Women

- The question in a new research paradigm becomes: What is it about being a black woman that increases her risk for infant mortality?
- The focus is on the *gap* not the *rate*
- *So what is the gap?*

The Racial Gap in Infant Mortality 1950-2000 NCHS 2001



The Gap

- I think of the gap as that place in the heart, mind and body of black women where history, stress, strain, sexism, racism, culture and everyday relationships combine to produce negative physical and mental health consequences.
- It has been alluded to and coined in emerging research as: “Sojourner Syndrome” (Mullings & Wali, 2000) “Shifting” (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003), and “Weathering” (Gereronimus, 1996).

How Should The Gap Be Explored:

- Black women must be partners in all aspects of the research...including the design...epistemic privilege of the oppressed.
- Not just increase qualitative research, but rethink epistemic privilege of female researchers of color.
- Life experience versus nine months of pregnancy.

Exploration Of The Gap

- Methods must not overly define or shape the questions: the women must shape the parameters...If not we will miss the complete picture and only capture segments of life experience.
- Methods must be expanded to include through exploration of life experience.
- Phenomenology is one method that examines life experience.

The Studies And The Method

- Two studies using interpretive phenomenology (Benner, 1994) as the overarching method.
- Method compatible with the Afrocentric and feminist paradigms.
- Autoethnography (McClaurin, 2000)—my voice was used to put the experience of the participants into a form that could be understood by the majority culture---*cultural mediator*.

Data Analysis

“Use your life experiences to help me understand the black woman’s risk for infant mortality.”

- Three narrative approaches for understanding socially imbedded knowledge: Paradigm cases, thematic analysis and exemplars.
- Qualitative research is measured by trustworthiness and accuracy: “Oh my God, this is my life, this is my story!”
- Peer debriefers and participants verified data.

The Studies

- One study took place in a rural college community (Blacksburg, Va.) with highly educated African American women (Dissertation study 2003). A total of **16** women between the ages of 35-65 participated.
- One study took place on the campus of North Carolina A & T State University (an HBCU in Greensboro, N.C.). **20** women participated. The majority of the participants were 19-23 years of age. **Funded by the School of Nursing Center for Health Disparities (NIH).**

The Studies

Inclusion criteria:

- Participants had to be female, identify as African American, and be at least 18 years old.
- For women who had experienced an infant loss, counseling services were offered.
- Women participated in extended interviews, or focus groups.

The Findings

Key findings in dissertation study:

- Participants reported a constant interplay of race and **stress** that has historical roots and is firmly planted in the current lives of African American women. This stress is present preconceptually, conceptually, and interconceptually and impacts a woman's ability to maintain a healthy pregnancy.

A Few Themes From Narratives

- Once upon a time life was not so pretty for little black girls.
- There are negative stereotypes about us.
- Our pain is swept under the rug.
- We all have burdens, but our burdens are not recognized.
- Our blackness is always with us.
- We navigate between two worlds.

Preliminary Findings From Current Study

- Understanding the experience of African American female college students will increase interpretation of data on college educated black women and their risk for infant mortality.
- “The Burdened Backpack”—African American college women cope with a number of social stresses to include relationships with men, finances, past relationships with their fathers, and oppression due to gender and race.

The Load Looks Light Because It Is Carried So Well

- Resiliency---The irony of race and health?
- Resiliency involves risk and protection and must be understood in future research and practice and policy interventions.
- African American women must be partners in all aspects of the research, including designing data collection tools.