

What lies beneath? A review of the literature on breastfeeding and African-American women from qualitative research studies

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Introduction

African-American (AA) women have the lowest breastfeeding (BF) rates in comparison to other racial/ethnic groups in the United States. The majority of the research published on this topic is cross-sectional survey designs (national or state level) or secondary data analysis studies. Few studies have examined breastfeeding in AA women using qualitative methods, which are useful for in-depth examination of phenomena, such as breastfeeding, and describing people's personal experiences.

Purpose

To review findings from qualitative studies exploring decision-making and personal experiences related to breastfeeding in African-American (or Black) women.



Methods

A review of relevant literature cited in electronic databases MEDLINE, CINAHL, and PsycINFO was conducted. Keywords used were 'breastfeeding', 'qualitative or interview or focus group' and 'African-American or Black'.

Studies relating to the research purpose of examining breastfeeding decision-making and personal experiences. Inclusion criteria included research studies employing qualitative or mixed methods with a study sample comprising of only AA or Black women, conducted in the United States in the past 20 years.

Of the initial search results, 4 articles met the inclusion criteria. The references of these 4 articles were reviewed for other studies that met the inclusion criteria, which yielded another 5 articles. Findings from a total of 9 studies are presented in the results.

Results

Author	Research Purpose	Sample	Research Design	Summary of Selected Findings
Underwood (1997)	To describe common infant feeding practices of low-income AA women in an inner-city and determine the influence of cultural and economic on infant feeding decisions variables	N=35 Mean age: 49.5 y (6 women were caregivers) Mean # children: 3.3 34.3% single	Focus groups (4) Wisconsin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Theme 1- Preferred Method of Infant Feeding: BF method of choice but majority formula-fed, heavy reliance on infant's physical and behavioral cues to determine feeding schedule. Theme 2-Introduction on Cereal(s) and Solid Foods: Belief that infants should be supplemented early regardless of feeding method Theme 3-Introduction of Water: Belief that giving infants water was necessary Theme 4-Influence of Culture & Economics: Practices "learned" from family and community members and "shared" with new mothers, applying others' "wisdom" and own "experience" when presented with challenges and cost barriers
Bentley (1999)	To examine how individuals within a AA woman's life influence infant feeding intentions	N=80	Mixed methods (Interviews) Baltimore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Theme 1-Physicians & health care providers: support (positive or negative) influences decision, missed discussion of breastfeeding during pregnancy, Theme 2-Mothers & grandmothers: family history and support important, lack of BF role models Theme 3-Child's father: support (positive or negative), father excluded from infant feeding decision, men don't like public BF
Corbett (2000)	To explore infant feeding style of low-income black women	N=10 Age range: 18-27y 80% H.S. completion 30% rural 60% intended to BF	Ethnographic field study (repeated interviews) Southeastern state	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Themes1 -Deciding to BF & knowledge of BF: BF practices varied, several combined with formula, information from healthcare providers during pregnancy important, health benefits for infant, lack of knowledge on BF process, maternal diet Theme 2-Attitudes & beliefs about BF: extended family not supportive; attitudes such as "nasty" revulsion yet curious, lack of exposure to BF women, no BF in public or in front of relatives, hearing from others "it hurts" Theme 3- Influences of Healthcare System: practices non-supportive of BF, shortcoming of peer counselor program, mixed messages from providers, fragmented health care for infant
Cricco-Lizza (2004, 2005, 2006)	To explore the infant feeding beliefs and experiences of non-Hispanic Black women enrolled in WIC.	N=130 (plus children, family and friends) <u>Note:</u> 11 primiparous key informants	Ethnography (18-months) metro New York	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Theme 1- Little to no experience with BF Theme 2-Life experiences included a preponderance of loss and stress Theme 3-infant feeding beliefs reflected responses to life experiences Theme 4-Nurses & physicians provided limited education and support for BF Theme 5-WIC positively viewed as a source of support in difficult times
McCarter-Spaulding (2007)	To learn about the experience of BF from black women who have BF a child	N=8 (4 West Indian/ Caribbean, 3 African) Age range: 31-35y 75% college degree	Focus group (1) (Phenomenology)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Theme 1- Making the decision to BF: Family history, health benefits Theme 2-Challenges and difficulties: Using a breast pump, concerns about milk supply, BF duration Theme 3- Benefits and positives: Low cost and convenience, enjoyed BF experience Theme 4- BF Support: Female relatives and friends with BF experience, supportive male partners, varied support from health providers, education & support should begin well before birth by real women, including more images of AA women
Robinson (2009)	To examine AA women's infant feeding choices with individual narrative interviews at 3 weeks postpartum	N=5 Mean age: 29.4 y 60% married 80% some college	Interviews (Pilot, exploratory study) Illinois suburb	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Theme 1- Factors Influencing BF: Maternal & infant advantages, own individual decision, bonding enhanced, previously BF, family exposure, provider support Theme 2-Factors Influencing FF: Failed BF attempts, non-supportive providers, free formula, convenience Theme 3-Opinions why other AA women choose not to breastfeed: Lack of maturity, de-creased education, laziness, selfishness, lack of attention in media, breasts viewed as sex objects
Lewallen (2010)	To explore issues related to initiating and sustaining BF in AA women	N=15 Mean age: 27	Focus groups (3) Southeastern state	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Theme 1-Perceived lack of BF information: lack of information on benefits, physical aspects of BF and complications of BF, written materials available Theme 2-BF in public/pumping at work: Difficult finding private place, partner's discomfort, strangers' reactions Theme 3-Lack of support: feeling isolated, no connection with other BF mothers

Discussion & Conclusion

Despite low breastfeeding rates nationally, African-American women are breastfeeding because of the health advantages. However barriers to continuing breastfeeding include lack of information and support from family and health providers. Most of these studies have research focused on breastfeeding intentions or infant feeding decision-making. Of the 3 studies exploring breastfeeding experiences of African-American women, only 1 used individual interviews. More qualitative research studies which use collaborative or participatory methods such as positive deviance, are needed to better understand the process of breastfeeding for African-American women.

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