

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 to 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.

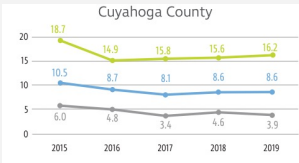


Figure A2. Trends in Infant Mortality rate (per 1,000 live births), by OH County and Race (2015-2019)



Methodology

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: The Representation of Maternal Embodiment

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.

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! [laughter]. But now it's much better. I feel more calm... CP_KC_01_6-2-16

Betterment: How Black mothers reconsider their social supports

I'm the only child on my mother's side and my dad has like six other kids, and I don't know them... I don't want that for my child because I know how I feel. I'm bitter and I'm sweet at the same time about it, I'm angry and I'm okay with it at the same time, but in reality I'm more so angry than okay with it. I'm like so now that I'm about to have my own child I don't, I feel like I'm thinking of, I feel like I need to think of preventative ways where my child won't end up like me ... That's what I feel, it's not about my feelings anymore, it's not about how I feel about my baby father, it's about my child now. And I don't want nobody to treat my child like the ugly duckling, because that's the way I feel about ...Like I feel like, [my dad] don't try to have a relationship with me and I feel like he don't try to make his kids accept me. ... but I feel like that's because [my mother] let them feel that way. [M]y mother never took me around and I feel like as a mom I can take those steps. ES_MC_01-07-27-16

Betterment: How Black mothers focus on the future to improve their child's life

"...to have a child is like you should want to raise your child better that you were raised. You should want your child to have a better childhood than you had. I feel like you should think of steps or goals or things you can do to prevent how, what you went through as a kid. Like for girls who have been raped when they were younger, what would you do for your daughter so she won't go through that? How will you have a relationship with your child so she could be able to tell you that this is what she went through? What steps would you take to prevent that from happening to your child? I think a lot more people should think like that, but they don't. Me I'm like, look this is where I'm like, this is a kid, I didn't like that as a kid, this is the way I feel, this is what affected me, this is why I acted this way, what can I do so my child won't have those same feelings or experience that feeling? What can I do? And that's what I do, like no I'm going to try this so when my child get older and if I fail at trying, then at least I tried and I know I tried to do something so it wouldn't go down this road." ES_MC_01-07-27-16

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.

Their day-to-day experience of Black motherhood is comprised of enduring and working through past trauma and struggle, the motivation to reach their potential and imagining and working toward creating a better life for their children.

As mothers they "embody risk" (Davis 2019)—carrying the burden of the ways that structural racism has entered and changed their body, making them and their children more vulnerable to disease and death. But as mothers they also embody the strength to resist—their stories of motherhood demonstrate radical acts of resistance; everyday attempts to thwart and transcend systems of racism far beyond their direct control.

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 to better advocate for systemic changes in healthcare that can ultimately improve outcomes for and save the lives of Black mothers and babies.

Select References

1. Infant Mortality Annual Report (2019) Ohio Department of Health
2. Davis, Dána-Ain. Reproductive injustice: Racism, pregnancy, and premature birth. Vol. 7. NYU Press, 2019