

African American Cultural Influences on Maternal/Child Health

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NUR 432: Maternal-Fetal Health

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June 18, 2024

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Description of the Culture

African Americans comprise approximately 13.4% of the population in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). In Champaign County, Illinois, African Americans represent around 12.2% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). This demographic's rich cultural heritage significantly influences health beliefs and practices, particularly maternal and child health. Understanding these cultural nuances is essential for providing effective and respectful healthcare.

Core Values of the Culture

Religion

Religious beliefs are a cornerstone in the African American community, with Christianity being the predominant faith. The church often serves as a source of spiritual guidance and community support, influencing health behaviors and attitudes. For example, religious modesty norms can impact the acceptance of male healthcare providers for female patients (Chatters et al., 2020). Faith and spirituality are critical in coping mechanisms and healthcare decisions, particularly during childbirth and postpartum.

Healing Beliefs and Practices

African American communities often view pain and suffering through a lens of historical resilience and endurance. This stoic approach to pain reflects the community's long-standing experiences with adversity (Williams & Jackson, 2019). Spiritual and communal support is integral during labor and postpartum periods, with practices such as prayer and rituals being

commonly employed to ensure the health and well-being of both mother and child (Robinson, 2018). Recent studies highlight significant disparities in pain management among African Americans, who often receive less adequate care due to biases and underestimation of their pain by healthcare providers. Coping mechanisms include community support and spirituality (BMC Psychology, 2023). There is a pressing need for culturally competent care to address these disparities and improve communication between patients and healthcare providers (JAMA Network, 2022).

Family Life

Common Structure of the Family

In African American culture, the family structure is predominantly diverse and can include nuclear, extended, and single-parent families. According to recent studies, extended family networks are particularly significant, often encompassing grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins (Perry, 2020). The presence of extended family members provides a robust support system, contributing to childcare, financial assistance, and emotional support. This close-knit family environment provides a robust support system for new mothers (Jones & Hill, 2021).

Role of Elders

Elders hold a significant role in African American families. They are generally respected and often serve as caregivers, advisors, and bearers of family history and traditions. It is common for elders to live with their families or remain in close contact, playing an active role in grandchildren's upbringing (Fields et al., 2021). Respect towards elders is manifested through daily interactions, involving them in decision-making processes, and celebrating their contributions during family gatherings and holidays (Smith, 2022).

Communication

Communication within African American families tends to be direct yet respectful. Verbal expression is highly valued, and women are generally encouraged to voice their health concerns openly to healthcare providers. Nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions and body language, convey emotions and preferences (Smith, 2019). Direct eye contact and expressive body language are common, but there is also a cultural sensitivity to nonverbal cues that may signify respect or discomfort (BMC Psychology, 2023).

Norms for Communication

In African American culture, communication norms are influenced by a rich oral tradition and a strong sense of community. Generally, communication is characterized by expressiveness, emotional richness, and a tendency to use indirect language to convey respect and politeness. Females in African American culture are generally allowed to speak to strangers and do not necessarily rely on their husbands to speak for them. This norm reflects a broader societal shift towards gender equality and empowerment within the community (Jones & Williams, 2023).

Verbal and Nonverbal Communication Norms

Verbal communication in African American culture often includes using African American Vernacular English (AAVE), which has unique grammatical, phonological, and lexical patterns. Storytelling, call-and-response, and rhetorical styles are prominent in verbal interactions (Green, 2021). Nonverbal communication, such as gestures, eye contact, and physical touch, is crucial. For instance, maintaining direct eye contact is a sign of confidence and

sincerity, while physical touch, such as hugging, is a common way to express warmth and affection (Taylor, 2020).

Gender-specific communication differences are also evident. Women in African American culture may use more expressive and emotive language compared to men. They often play a central role in maintaining family cohesion and community ties through communication practices (Davis & Johnson, 2022). Conversely, men might exhibit more reserved communication styles, especially in public or formal settings.

Diet

Food holds substantial cultural significance within African American communities, symbolizing comfort, tradition, and communal bonding. Specific dietary practices are often observed postpartum to promote recovery and replenish the mother's energy (Johnson & Brown, 2020). These preferences can impact hospitalization experiences, highlighting the need for healthcare providers to offer culturally appropriate food options to enhance patient satisfaction and compliance (Anderson & Green, 2018).

Comfort food: Several comfort meals may be preferred due to their positive emotional and psychological effects. These are often age-old recipes passed down through the centuries, fulfilling cultural, spiritual, and nutritional functions.

Herbal Teas and Natural Medicines: Using herbal teas and natural medicines can help promote lactation, ease discomfort, and promote postpartum recovery. These remedies may be steeped in

cultural beliefs about the healing properties of specific herbs and plants (Johnson & Brown, 2020).

Implications of Core Values on Healthcare Relating to Childbearing Experience

The core values of African American culture, including the importance of family support, respect for elders, and community ties, have significant implications for healthcare, particularly during the childbearing experience. These values can influence health behaviors, perceptions of medical care, and interactions with healthcare providers.

Family Support

The strong emphasis on family support within African American culture means that pregnant women often rely on a broad network of family members for emotional and practical support. This network can include parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and close family friends (Perry, 2020). Healthcare providers should recognize the role of these extended networks and include them in the care process when appropriate. This can help ensure that the patient feels supported and that their preferences and needs are understood and respected.

Respect for Elders

The respect for elders in African American families means that elder family members often play a crucial role in healthcare decisions, including childbearing. Elders may provide advice, share cultural practices, and offer emotional support. Healthcare providers should be aware of elders' influence and seek to include them in discussions and decisions when they align with the patient's wishes (Fields et al., 2021).

Community Ties

Community ties and a sense of collective identity can also impact healthcare experiences. African American women may seek care from providers who are culturally competent and who understand the specific health challenges and disparities faced by the community. Trust in the healthcare system can be a significant issue, and building trust requires sensitivity to cultural values and open, respectful communication (Jones & Williams, 2023).

Addressing Healthcare Disparities

Recent studies highlight ongoing disparities in maternal and child health outcomes among African American women. These disparities are often rooted in systemic issues, including biases in healthcare delivery, socioeconomic factors, and differences in access to care (Taylor, 2020). A multifaceted approach that incorporates community involvement, policy changes, and initiatives to improve the cultural competency of healthcare professionals is needed to address these discrepancies.

Tips/Suggestions/Interventions

Cultural Competence Training

Healthcare providers should engage in ongoing education on African American cultural norms and healthcare disparities to enhance their cultural competence. This training can help providers understand and respect the cultural context of their patients' healthcare beliefs and practices (Jackson & Lee, 2020).

Respectful Communication

Healthcare providers need to address African American patients directly while acknowledging the involvement of family members. This approach respects the patient's

autonomy and ensures that healthcare decisions are made collaboratively (Garcia & Martinez, 2019).

Community Engagement

Collaborating with community leaders and support groups can bridge cultural gaps and promote health equity. Engaging with the community helps build trust and ensures that healthcare interventions are culturally appropriate and effective (Thompson & Harris, 2019).

Conclusion

In conclusion, understanding and respecting the cultural influences on health beliefs and practices within the African American community is crucial for providing effective maternal and child healthcare. Recognizing the importance of religion, family structure, communication norms, and dietary practices allows healthcare providers to offer culturally sensitive care. By engaging in cultural competence training, employing respectful communication, and collaborating with community leaders, healthcare professionals can improve health outcomes and build trust with African American patients. Such efforts are vital in addressing healthcare disparities and promoting health equity in diverse communities.

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