Experiences of racism and breastfeeding initiation and duration among first-time mothers of the Black Women’s Health Study

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Background and Significance

Race, racism and health:

Race: “phenomena that results in avoidable and unfair inequalities in power, resources and opportunities across racial or ethnic groups.”

➢ Asthma
➢ Obesity
➢ Breast cancer
➢ Poor birth outcomes

Specific Aims

1. To investigate the association between experiences of racism and breastfeeding initiation among the participants of the Black Women’s Health Study (BWHS)

2. To investigate the association between experiences of racism and breastfeeding duration among participants of the BWHS.

3. To investigate the relationship between selected life-course factors and breastfeeding initiation and duration among participants of the BWHS.
**Conceptual Framework**

Upstream

- Parental
- Peer
- Neighborhood

Downstream

- Psychological
- Physiological
- Social

Shaded boxes indicate primary exposure and outcome variables as well as covariates.

**Methods**

- **Methodology**: Prospective secondary analysis of the BWHS
- **Human Subjects**: Approved Boston University IRB; Exempt from review UMass Med IRB
- **Setting**: Longitudinal cohort (N=153,001) enrolled in 1995; 2 Year Follow Up; 82% Follow Up Rate

**Sample**

- Enrolled in 1995 = 58,001
- Did not complete questionnaire = 5,863
- Multiparous in 1997 = 36,130
- No births 1997-2005 = 13,972
- Eligible Cohort = 30,936
- BF initiation N=2,705
- BF duration N=2,172

**Measurement**

- **Breastfeeding Initiation**
  - Refers to whether or not a woman initiates breastfeeding upon the birth of her child.
  - "Did you breastfeed?" (Yes or No)

- **Breastfeeding Duration**
  - Refers to how long after birth, the child received breast milk or how old child was when stopped receiving breast milk.
  - 1999 and 2001 (<3 months, 3-5 months and 6 months or more)
  - 2003 and 2005 (open ended question)
  - 2011 data used to fill in for breastfeeding initiation and duration

**Aim 3: Life-Course Characteristics**

- **Natality or Country of birth (U.S., other)**
  - Participant
  - Her husband
  - Her father

- **Neighborhood Segregation**
  - 1997 ("Up to age 18, what kind of neighborhood did you live in?")
  - 1999 ("What kind of neighborhood do you live in?")
  - New 2011 (Predominantly Black, White, mixed or other)
**Results**

- **AIM 1**: Experiences of *racism* and breastfeeding *initiation* (job, housing, police)
  - Experiences of racism in job setting associated with lower odds of breastfeeding initiation (p > .05)
  - Experiences of racism with the police associated with significantly higher odds of breastfeeding initiation (p < .05)
  
- **AIM 2**: Experiences of *racism* and breastfeeding *duration* (job, housing, police)
  - The odds of breastfeeding at 3-5 mos. vs. 3 months were significantly lower for women reporting racism in the job setting (p < .05)
  - Experiences of racism with police was associated with significantly higher odds of breastfeeding at 3-5 months and 6 months (p < .05)

  *Adjusted for age, BMI, years of education, marital status, geographic region, occupation and SES index*

- **AIM 3**: *Life-course characteristics* and breastfeeding *initiation*
  - Women whose mothers and fathers were born in the U.S. (vs. other) had significantly lower odds of initiating breastfeeding. (p < .05)
  - Living in a Black neighborhood up to age 18, compared with a White neighborhood, was associated with lower odds of initiating breastfeeding. (Similar for 1999)

  *Adjusted for age, BMI, years of education, marital status, geographic region, occupation and SES index*

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**Discussion**

- First time mothers in this sample experienced institutional racism.
- Experiences of racism in workplace predicted lower odds of breastfeeding at 3-5 months.
- Social institutions produce political resources through policies.
- Cultural racism- negative stereotypes and micro-aggressions in the workplace.


Discussion

- Women who reported experiences of racism with the police had significantly higher odds of breastfeeding initiation and duration.
- Strength, resilience, resistance hypotheses
- Fear of police encounters

Implications for Policy and Practice

Job Setting:

- Workplace lactation programs: beneficial to focus on the 3-5 month window by providing culturally congruent care and support for Black women in the workplace.
- Individual care is critical but equally critical to dismantle systems of oppression the workplace through policies.

Conclusion

- Investigated the association between experiences of racism and breastfeeding initiation and duration.
- Experiences of racism in the employment setting was inversely associated with breastfeeding duration.
- Breastfeeding initiation and duration varied by life-course characteristics.
- Innovative interventions that address individual level factors related to experiences of racism as well as interventions that address structural factors are warranted.

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Strengths
- National sampling procedure
- Sample size
- Prospective design
- First-time mothers
- Recall bias reduced
- Life-course factors
- Racism related to health promotion vs. morbidity and mortality

Limitations
- Racism measured at baseline.
- Women in this sample, not nationally representative.
- 1999 racial segregation measure not prospective.
- Exposure to racism does not assess the harmful effects of racism