

Seeking to Do What's Best for Baby: A Grounded Theory

Abstract

Objective: The original purpose of this study was to develop a substantive theory that described the decision making process for women in a rural population to exclusively breastfeed to six months. But, as is characteristic of classic grounded theory, the research question changed during the data analysis process. The question that was revealed during analysis was: "What is the main concern of rural new mothers who are breastfeeding and how do they continually resolve that concern?"

Design: Using a qualitative research approach, this study employed a classic grounded theory method.

Population: The study population consisted of 19 women from VA or WV communities designated as rural using the Rural Health Information Hub and who reported planning to exclusively breastfeed. The participants' ages ranged between 19 and 40 and majority of them self-reported as Caucasian (89.47%). The distance they traveled for health care was between 15 and 50 miles. More than half of the mothers reported returning to employment before their babies were weaned from breastfeeding.

Variables studied: Reported experiences of exclusive breastfeeding through six months by rural mothers

Methods: Both purposive and theoretical sampling was used to recruit candidates matching characteristics of interest to ensure information-rich data. The sample was accessed through a rural Virginia hospital system. Each participant was interviewed once in a location of their choosing and following completion of informed consent. Participants also completed a brief demographic questionnaire to assist the researcher in describing the population of the study. No note taking, video, or audio recordings were made during the interview. Constant comparative analysis began with the first interview and proceeded until data saturation occurred and a substantive theory emerged that explains how rural mothers resolved their concern of doing what they thought best for their baby.

Findings/Conclusions: The theory of seeking to do what's best for baby emerged from the data and describes the process that a mother works through to succeed in her goal of doing what was best for baby. It consists of a temporal three-stage process. The stages are 1) pre-pregnancy nescience, 2) working through, and 3) succeeding or surrendering. The process is influenced by evolving internal conditions, basic social psychological processes, and basic social structural processes which account for most of the variation in the pattern of behavior.

Implications: The results of this study begin to fill the gap in knowledge about the choices made by mothers to exclusively breastfeed to six months or to end the exclusive breastfeeding experience. The knowledge that previously exists does not fully explain the experience nor personalize the journey that occurs when exclusively breastfeeding. Additional research is called for to promote the practice of exclusive breastfeeding for both mothers and practitioners, as the lack of consistency in information and care impacts all mothers who are seeking to do what's best for baby. The main practice consideration is to provide consistent education about breastfeeding by nurses and other health care professionals.