

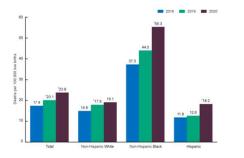
Suffering in Silence: Black Maternal Mortality and Epistemic Injustice

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Introduction

What is supposed to be a lovely and exciting time for new mothers, is inherently risky and lifethreatening for Black mothers. In 2020, the CDC reported that the Black maternal mortality rate was 55.3 deaths per 100,000 live births.1 This is more than twice the national average of the overall maternal mortality rate. While complex factors such as access to healthcare and socioeconomic status influence maternal health outcomes, the ways in which physicians interact with pregnant Black women needs to be addressed. I propose using the concept of epistemic injustice to examine interactions between physicians and expecting Black women. In Epistemic Injustice: Power and Ethics of Knowing, English philosopher Miranda Fricker examines the relationship between credibility and epistemic injustice. Black women are silenced, and their symptoms are overlooked because their testimonies are not given the credit that is due. In my research, I have found that testimonial and hermeneutical injustice towards pregnant Back women is perpetuated because of biological fallacies and implicit biases in pain treatment and patient-physician interactions. Exploring these connections to Black maternal health care allows us to shed light on the mistreatment of Black mothers. Work can be done to reduce Black maternal mortality rates in the US.

Figure 1. Maternal mortality rates, by race and Hispanic origin: United States, 2018-2020

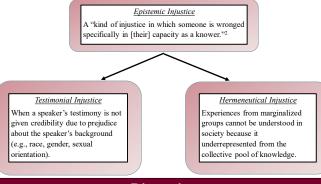


Source: National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics System, Mortality.1

Methods

For my research, I searched for peer-reviewed health articles in PubMed. The articles included were found through the following search terms : ((false beliefs) AND (pain)) AND (racial disparities); ((((Black women) AND (racial disparities)) AND (ethnic disparities)) AND (maternal mortality)) AND (maternal morbidity); (((patient provider) AND (racial disparities)) AND (mortality)) AND (maternal). Then, I looked through articles that were published within the last 10 years, between 2012 to 2022. That way, the data and information pertaining to my research was current and relevant.

What is Epistemic Injustice?



Discussion

According to a recent study at University of Virginia, 50% of residents and medical students in their sample endorsed a false belief about the biological differences between Black and white patients (e.g., "Blacks' skin is thicker than Whites" "Blacks' nerve endings are less sensitive than Whites"").3 The presence of such beliefs **Biological** can influence the way physicians perceive pain and treat Black mothers-to-be in an Fallacies emergency.

In a focus group study with women who experienced a severe maternal morbidity event (e.g., eclampsia, seizure, stroke), several women felt that their pain was dismissed by their physicians and treated as normal consequence of childbirth.⁴ Black mothers expressed more dissatisfaction with maternal health services because of lack Implicit Biases of consistency and responsiveness to their pain. Inadequate pain assessments can lead to inadequate treatments that could complicate pregnancy even more. Treatment

in Pain

These implicit biases contribute to poor patient-physician interactions. Women who experienced a severe maternal morbidity event emphasized there was a lack of empathy and attentiveness to the severity of their condition.4 However, Black women were also frustrated by their provider's limited communication and fragmented care.4 Implicit Bias in Physicians missing signs of a serious illness can lead to the death of a pregnant Black Patientwomen if they are ignored. Physician Interaction

Black mothers-to-be have expressed that their symptoms are often overlooked and dismissed, even if their condition was severe. How can pregnant Black women received proper medical treatment if physicians do not believe them? Physicians discrediting their testimonies based on their own biases is a form of testimonial injustice. By Testimonial questioning the credibility of their pain, physicians are denying pregnant Black Injustice women the right to be epistemic agents of their own bodies

Physicians continuously discrediting the pain pregnant Black women experience leads to hermeneutical injustice. If physicians cannot recognize how their biases impact their practice, physicians will improperly care for the pregnant Black women. They will lack the knowledge needed to understand individuals who come from the same Hermeneutical marginalized groups. Consequently, contributing to the stark racial disparities in Injustice maternal mortality rates as expecting Black women are systemically undertreated.

Conclusion

Physicians perpetuate epistemic injustice towards pregnant Black women by believing in biological fallacies and exhibiting implicit bias in pain treatment and patient-physician interactions. The mistreatment of expecting Black women leads to poor physical and mental health problems, which contributes to maternal mortality. Because of the lack of credibility given to Black mothers-to-be , they must advocate for themselves and their community. Not only to overcome physicians' personal biases, but to receive proper medical care and have the chance to be a mother. Work can be done to reduce Black maternal mortality rates in the US. Physicians can:

- Believe Black Women
- Recognize Implicit Biases
 - In a study conducted by the Society for Maternal Fetal Medicine, 83% of providers believed that disparities influenced their practice, but only 29% believed their care for patients was affected by their personal biases.5 Failing to acknowledge their own biases further intensifies the discrimination expecting Black women already face in the healthcare system.
- Create Educational Programs
 - · Through medical education, implicit biases can be taught and misinformation about the pain tolerance can be dispelled. Educational programs can help physicians reduce their biases, enhance their medical practice, and improve patients' health outcomes.
- More Quantitative Research
 - · This research heavily relied upon qualitative studies to learn about the experience Black mothers face in the healthcare system. However, more quantitative studies should be conducted to measure physicians' implicit biases. Then, see how much it impacts Black maternal mortality.

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