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Listening to mothers: qualitative studies on motherhood and depression from Goa, India

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Abstract

There is little qualitative research on depression in motherhood from non-Western societies. The objective of the study described in this paper was to use qualitative methods to investigate the cultural validity of the construct of post-natal depression (PND) and its social and cultural contexts. The study was nested in a cohort of mothers recruited to study the risk factors and outcome of PND in Goa, India. In-depth interviews were carried out with 39 mothers (19 of whom were found to be suffering from PND as defined by a cut-off score on the Edinburgh PND scale) and their husbands purposively recruited from the cohort. An illness narrative was conducted with mothers who were categorized as suffering from PND and their husbands to elicit their explanatory models. The two groups (PND and non-PND) of mothers were comparable in terms of socio-demographic characteristics. PND mothers had lower levels of practical help and emotional support. The symptoms reported by PND mothers were

similar to those recorded in studies with women in other cultures suggesting a universal clinical presentation of PND. Causal attributions for the experience of depression focused on economic difficulties and poor marital relationship. All mothers expressed the need for more practical help and support during the period after childbirth; husbands in both groups were often disengaged from baby care or supporting the mother. The study provides validity for the construct of PND in an Indian setting, but also shows that the emotional distress is interpreted from the context of social adversity, poor marital relationships and cultural attitudes towards gender rather than a biomedical psychiatric category. Contrary to the assumption that socio-cultural contexts associated with childbirth in non-Western societies protect mothers from depression, factors unique to the culture such as gender preference and the low involvement of husbands in child-care are major causes of stress to mothers.



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Keywords

Post-natal depression; Cross-cultural; Social support; Maternal; India

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