Epigenetics and Reproductive Justice

Roberta Hunte, PhD and Lisa Weasel, PhD
Women, Gender & Sexuality Studies
Portland State University
Isadora Lynn Hunte-Pool
silently born on July 14, 2014
What is reproductive justice?

Reproductive Justice is the complete physical, mental, spiritual, political, social, and economic well-being of women and girls, based on the full achievement and protection of women's human rights.

- Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice
- Western States Center's framework:
Core Reproductive Justice principles

• The right to decide when and if someone will have a baby, and the conditions under which they will give birth.
• The right to decide to not have a baby and the full range of options to prevent this.
• The right to parent the children one has with the full range of social supports necessary, and to do so in an environment and community that are safe and free from individual and state violence.
• That one has control over what happens to their bodies.

http://www.trustblackwomen.org/our-work/what-is-reproductive-justice/9-what-is-reproductive-justice and Western States Center
Human Rights and birth outcomes

Civil Rights – Non-Discrimination, Equality
Political Rights – Voting, Speech, Assembly
Economic Rights – Living Wage, Workers’ Rights
Social Rights – Health Care, Food, Shelter, Education
Cultural Rights – Religion, Language, Dress
Environmental Rights – Clean Air, Water, and Land. No Toxic Neighborhoods
Developmental Rights – Control Own Natural Resources
Sexual Rights – Right to Have or Not Have Children, Right to Marry & When, Same-Sex
Rights, Trans-gender Rights, Right to Birth Control and Abortion, Right to Sexual Pleasure and Define Families
Preterm Birth Among Infants, by Maternal Race/Ethnicity, 2012 (Data are preliminary)

Percent of Live Births:
- Non-Hispanic White: 10.29
- Non-Hispanic Black: 16.53
- Hispanic: 11.58
- American Indian/Alaska Native (Includes Hispanics): 13.25
- Asian/Pacific Islander (Includes Hispanics. Separate data for Asians, Native Hawaiians, and Other Pacific Islanders is not available.): 10.15

Percentage of Small-for-Gestational-Age Births, by Race and Hispanic Ethnicity---United States, 2005

[SOURCES: National Vital Statistics System. Annual natality files. CDC MMWR Weekly December 19, 2008/ 57(50); 1359.]
Birth Outcomes and mother’s region of birth for non-Hispanic black births in the U.S.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mother’s place of birth</th>
<th>Preterm Birth rate</th>
<th>SGA birthrate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S. born</td>
<td>12.4% (N=32,241)</td>
<td>16.7% (N=43,211)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign born</td>
<td>9.4% (N=3622)</td>
<td>12.0% (N=4634)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caribbean born</td>
<td>11.0% (N=2379)</td>
<td>12.8% (N=2767)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Saharan Africa born</td>
<td>7.3% (N=1243)</td>
<td>11.0% (N=1867)</td>
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</tbody>
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From genomics to epigenetics

• Race, class and gender socially encoded, physically embodied

• How?

• Epigenetics: [heritable] changes in gene expression not involving changes to DNA sequence

• Methylation, acetylation of DNA and histones
Epigenetics

Epigenetics: Embodying Intersectionality

Psychosocial Stress

Nutrition

Epigenetics: The promise and the peril
Epigenetics and Reproductive Justice

- Lifestyle “choices”
- Individual focus
- “bad mothers”
- Race, class, gender

Source: DNA Learning Center
http://learn.genetics.utah.edu/content/epigenetics/inheritance/
Bringing epigenetics into the conversation:
The impact of negative health messages

-advertising targeted at African-American and Hispanic women tends to focus on products with negative health implications; opposite true for Caucasian women (Duerksen 2005)

-public health messages focusing on negative effects for African-Americans lead to poorer outcomes and discourage screening (Psychology & Sociology 2008; Frisby 2002)

source: cited in Davis-Carroll, 2011
60% of all HBI participants indicated experiencing discrimination while getting services during their or their partner’s current or most recent pregnancy (HBI 2016)

Women and their partners experienced these kinds of discrimination when trying to get services:

- Race or skin color (40%-50%)
- Income (10%)
- Sex or gender (20%)
- Age (10%)
- Insurance status (10%)
- Religion (10%)
- Pregnancy status (5%)
- Immigration status (5%)
- Other (5%)

Source: Multnomah County Healthy Birth Initiative report 2016
“It’s all about the medicine”: Or is it? Interrupting epigenetics

maybe this is where to put in the statement about Santa Claus and that epigenetics means we can’t ignore race- but we have to interrupt the current epigenetics discourse to change the way race is constructed and embodied in clinical practice

- i agree. i think an interesting piece is the literature focuses on what happens in pregnancy. It does not focus enough on the cumulative impacts of stress or on what happens before pregnancy.

-Historical Trauma (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998):

“a constellation of characteristics associated with massive cumulative group trauma across generations”

-Early-life trauma can effect epigenetic regulation (Labonte et al 2012); studies on Holocaust descendants
Bringing epigenetics into the conversation:

An Ethic of Resistance

Hilda Davis-Carroll (2011)

“-Agency: Claim their personal mental, spiritual, and physical determinants of health rather than relying solely on descriptions determined by public health media messages;

-Affirming Language: Create the messages to assure they are relevant to and affirm their own experience and self-efficacy;

-Communal Power: build health circles where positive stories of healing can be shared intergenerationally”

source: Davis-Carroll (2011) page 222
Skills of daily resistance from black tradeswomen

Roberta Hunte (2012)

Black tradeswomen shared personal protective factors in helping them succeed despite racial and gender discrimination:

• Building self-esteem - self-pride and the ability to overcome obstacles; critical consciousness of the realities of oppression; a sense of purpose; self-knowledge of one’s own competence; development of personal capacity; self-acceptance; testing the self;

• Finding the best opportunity to work
• Skill development
• Building a community of support off the job
Guiding principles for Interventions

- Human Rights
- Repro Justice
- Centers most impacted
- Body Sovereignty
- Intersection - ality
Healthy Birth Initiative with Multnomah County

Multnomah County: African-American community has twice the rates of LBW and infant mortality compared to white people (HBI 2016)

HEALTHY BIRTH INITIATIVE (HBI):

HBI provides pregnant African American women and their families an array of supporting services such as goal planning, transportation, respite care, advocacy, family planning, mental health support, breastfeeding support, father engagement opportunities, multigenerational involvement, leadership development and community connection through its Community Action Network (CAN.)

Healthy Birth Initiative- Multnomah County 503.988.3387
Key questions we are grappling with:

- What is it to support black people pre-and during pregnancy to have healthier outcomes?

- What is it to support black families to have healthier outcomes for their families?

- How is an understanding of race necessary to be integrated into your interventions?
References


DNA Learning Center, http://learn.genetics.utah.edu/content/epigenetics/inheritance/


Hunte, Roberta ““My walk has never been average”: Black tradeswomen negotiating intersections of race and gender in long term careers in the United States building trades.” Dissertation University of Manitoba 2012.


