

Exploring mothering occupations: Towards an occupational understanding of breastfeeding

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Introduction

There is a growing body of knowledge of women's experiences of breastfeeding from social scientific theoretical perspectives, often focusing on bodily (e.g. Kelleher, 2006) and social aspects (e.g. Mahon-Daly & Andrews, 2002). Occupational science research on mothering has mostly originated from the US (Esdaile & Olson 2004); frequently exploring the experience of white, middle class women (Horne, Corr, & Earle, 2005). Little attention has been paid to breastfeeding (Esdaile & Olson, 2004).

Objectives

Participants will be introduced to and explore the key constructs of the occupational meaning of breastfeeding within the context of mothering.

Methods

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with fifty women from various backgrounds within the UK and thematically analysed (transcripts & videos accessible on www.healthtalkonline.org).

Results

Breastfeeding considerably influences a woman's identity. It validates her perceived competency as a mother, frequently being equated to "being a good mother" by enabling her to both nurture and comfort her child. Mothers socially and emotionally relate to their child through breastfeeding.

Breastfeeding is a co-occupation and process of negotiation between a mother and child in which both of them engage, sometimes more for the mother (e.g. identity, feeling good as a mother), and sometimes more for the child (e.g. nurture, comfort).

Breastfeeding is highly contextualised. At a socio-cultural level, mothers experience general pressure to breastfeed, however, there are clear age restrictions outside which breastfeeding will be considered inappropriate at least in the public domain. In terms of the physical environment, mothers choose and create spaces and situations which facilitate breastfeeding. Some mothers become highly skilled at creating stability within the family unit by making breastfeeding part of family times and routines.

Conclusion

Breastfeeding is a complex aspect of mothering a young child within the family unit, shaping a woman's identity. It is equally influenced by mothering skills and the multifaceted socio-cultural context in which it takes place.

Contribution

This study has implications for occupational therapy practitioners, highlighting the importance of considering breastfeeding as part of mothering within assessment and intervention. Further research

is required to extend and consolidate our occupational understanding of breastfeeding and other aspects of mothering.