

The Meaning of Breastfeeding in Korean Mothers

Shin Jeong Kim¹ · Geum Hee Jeong¹

ABSTRACT

The Purpose of this study was to explore the meaning of breastfeeding using a phenomenological research methodology. The sample consisted of 9 primiparous mothers who had breastfed their babies at least for 3 consecutive months. Data were collected from January 10 to February 28, 1998 through interviewing.

The research question was "What was the meaning of breastfeeding to breastfeeding mothers?" Responses to non-structured open-ended question was audio-recorded during the interview. Data were analyzed using the phenomenological method of Colazzi. From the protocols, significant statements about meaning of breastfeeding were clustered into 8 themes. Mothers perceived meaning of breastfeeding as feeling of unification through tie, expression of love, gift, nutritional supplement, duty as a mother, nurturing, mystery, and identity.

From the results of this study, breastfeeding mothers perceived breastfeeding positively, so nurses need to encourage mothers to breastfeed her baby and develop program which can promote successful breastfeeding.

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of time, breastfeeding has been considered one of the world's the most natural occurrences. Breastfeeding is a natural physiologic process which human survival has depended upon for uncounted generations. Every mother is endowed with the ability to feed her young(Dilts, 1985).

Anthropological studies underscore the fact that although breastfeeding is a biological function, the patterns through which it is learned and expressed are social in origin(Brack, 1975). In cultures where it is accepted that women breastfeed their babies,

almost of all women do so.

In Korea, most women traditionally learn breastfeeding from their mother or their extended relatives(Yoo, 1991). But under the influence of Western culture, breastfeeding has shown steady decline since the 1970's to where only 10-20% of Korean mothers breastfeed at least one child(Hong, Jeong, Kim, Nam & Kim et al., 1982). The changing role of women from domestic pursuits to jobs and professional careers may have contributed to the decline of breastfeeding. Breastfeeding is associated with the traditional wife/mother role, but such roles are being modified, postponed, or rejected by a

¹ RN, PhD, Assistant Professor, Department of Nursing Science, Hallym University, Chunchon, Korea

large number of young women.

After some decades of constant decline in the proportion of mothers breastfeeding their babies, there is a movement towards increasing breastfeeding, led by organizations such as UNICEF and the Korean Nurses Association (Kim & Yang, 1997).

Breast milk provides better nutrition and temporary immunity to certain diseases and is far less likely to elicit an allergic reaction. The sucking gives satisfaction to the baby and at the same time, benefits the mother by contracting the uterus. It is also associated with a reduction in the incidence of breast cancer. Breast milk contains in correct portions all the necessary nutrients for most babies and at the same time protects them against infection, and thus has been termed the "perfect" food (Arafat & Allen, 1981; Bottorff, 1990; Entwistle, 1991). Human breast milk has become specifically adapted to the nutritional requirements of the human infant, just as the milks of other species meet their offspring's specific needs (Riodan & Countryman, 1980). Folklore has often referred to breast milk as "white blood", considering it as substitute for the placental blood of intrauterine life. Within the past decade, with the aid of sophisticated laboratory techniques, scientific research has substantiated the unique properties of many individual components of human breast milk. Studies continue to show that breastfeeding saves lives, according to the WHO.

The experience of mothers who continue to breastfeed when other alternatives are available has received little attention (Kim & Lee, 1993). The aim of this study is to stimulate thinking about breastfeeding and to enhance understanding of what breastfeeding is like for mothers in a deeper more meaningful way.

II. METHODS

1. Subjects

For the purpose of this study, breastfeeding was defined as delivery of the mother's breast milk to the baby as the primary source of nutriment for more than 3 consecutive months. The purposive sample consisted of 9 primiparous mothers who had breastfed their babies for at least 3 months and 'partial breast feeding' was not included in this sample. All of the mothers were Korean and middle class, ranging in age from 28 to 36 years, two of the mothers worked outside of the home. The total length of time that each mother had breastfed ranged from three months to one and half years. The objective was to obtain in-depth and comprehensive data from a few knowledgeable subjects, rather than superficial data from many subjects. This sample size was considered adequate. The number of subjects was determined according to the time of saturation when the statements were repeated.

2. Data collection and method

The period of data collection is from January, 10, to February 28, 1998. The sampling technique is "snowballing", which one participant refers another person to be interviewed. After introducing mothers, participation in study was permitted explaining the object and method briefly by telephone. Participation in study was not enforced and explain subject privacy that study will progress anonymously and data will not use except study objects.

Before interview the mothers, researchers confirm the easy date and time of subjects. Interviews were done in the womens' homes, using a non-structured guide that permitted freedom to relate personal experiences and beliefs. At the time of interviews, researchers ask mothers to speak the meaning of breastfeeding to them. In- depth interviews were conducted with the 9 primiparous breastfeeding mothers to explore and describe

their attitudes and beliefs related to breastfeeding. Interview time took about 20-30 minutes and carried out 1-2 times according to subjects. The data were tape-recorded with their permission.

The research question of this study is what is the meaning of breastfeeding to breastfeeding mothers.

3. Data analysis

The method of data analysis based on phenomenological method suggested by Colaizzi(1978). The contents of the recorded tapes transcribed A4 size notebook as soon thereafter as possible. Reading the prepared data several times over again, draw lines under the meaningful contents.

Reliability between researchers calculated by the method of Holsti was 97.4%.

Degree of reliability

$$= \frac{2M}{N1+ N2} = \frac{76}{78} = 97.4\%$$

The contents were categorized by the reference of Korean dictionary and validity was tested by the 3 nursing professors' verification.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the interviews with the mothers, significant statements draw from the law data indicating the meaning of breastfeeding. And significant statements organized into formulating meanings which were then grouped into clusters of themes.

Finally 38 formulating meanings were appeared and clusteded in 8 themes: feeling of unification, expression of love, gift, nutritional supplement, duty as a mother, nurturing, mystery, identity.

The results from the interviews are summarized as follows.

1. Feeling of Unification through tie

Feeling of unification through tie contains 6 formulating meanings: naval string, physical coupling, inseperable one body, last unbrical cord, connection and medium between baby and mother.

The relationship of breastfeeding to the quality of the interaction between the mother and infant was less frequently discussed than the health and practical benefits. In breastfeeding, a mother and infant become one, and a bond is formed(Brack, 1975; Kim & Lee, 1993). The decision to breastfeed may signal a greater attachment to the infant. Mothers who decided to breastfeed their child described their emotional relation to their mate as "close", "second ranking", rather than as "very close", which was the primary choice of the bottle feeders(Arafat & Allen, 1981). One mother said that "Nursing is a very rewarding experience. It feels like a navel string. Through breastfeeding the baby and I can continue to be one after he is born". The mother's comments imply that, by bottle feeding, the mother sacrifices some of the natural closeness and warmth that breastfeeding fosters. Other comments included, "a physical coupling as missing one's native place", "return to baby's land of adoption", "last umbilical cord". "I felt particularly close to the baby". On the other hand, as the attachment grew between the mothers and their infants, some of the mothers also felt "tied down". To establish a good supply of breast milk, the mother had to be available to their infants and breastfeed on demand(Bottorff & Morse, 1990). In fact, these mothers kept their babies near them day and night and fed them whenever they were hungry or needed comfort. Some said that because breastfeeding ties the mother down, it sometimes becomes impossible to continue (Knafl, 1974). When a mother persists with breastfeeding, she persists not only for herself,

but, more importantly, for her infant. Thus it seems that babies who are fed in this way are invariably satisfied and seldom cry.

2. Expression of Love

Expression of love contains 5 formulating meanings: mother's love, a kind of attachment, true heart, human nature and motherhood.

Breastfeeding is not only a method of physical nurturing, but is a way of communicating with another human being and expressing love. As a result, breastfeeding is never just a matter of technique or just a matter of filling a baby up with milk in the same way you fill up the tank of a car with petrol(Entwistle, 1991). Mothers perceived breastfeeding as "mother's love", "a kind of attachment", "heart". "Breastfeeding means giving all my mind to baby. I feel friendly towards my baby.", "I express my human nature through breastfeeding inexpressible warm-hearted emotion towards my baby.", "My love for my baby grows daily. I can watch my baby more closely, and hold it in my arms more tightly.", "I expected a baby boy, but instead my baby turned out to be a girl. So, I was initially disappointed, but through breastfeeding I grew to love my daughter". Through these comments, we can confirm that breastfeeding involves strong emotions and formation of affection between the infant and mother.

3. Gift

Gift contains 6 formulating meanings: the best gift, the first present, God's present, the thing baby want, the thing only mother can give and the thing baby can take.

The gift of breast milk, unlike many other gifts, is not something that can be bought or brought about through an act of will. It is a gift that can only come from giving oneself.

One mother in this study stated that breastfeeding is "the first, and the best gift a mother can give". Others stated that "the baby can receive who have luck in eating.", "While breastfeeding, I feel as though I could spend the whole day with my baby.", "It is the sole thing I can give as freely as the baby wishes.", "Never-changing, almost everyday I thought about breastfeeding. Because my lover get better grow up". As a gift from nature, her breasts begin to swell and drip with the milk in preparation for the giving. The contented child returns a gift that continues the exchange. The child's eyes sparkle with delight, and a smile comes to her lips.

4. Nutritional supplement

Nutritional supplement contain 5 formulating meanings: the best food, natural food, ideal nutrition, diet, main nutrient.

Breastfeeding mothers view breast milk as baby food and generally believe that breastfeeding is more nutritious for the infant than formula. Mothers rarely used scientific terminology(i.e., lactose and protein), but they described breast milk as containing nutrients, vitamins, and antibodies. All mothers agreed that the significance of colostrum was related to it's "concentrated" and "rich" supply of antibodies. The mothers emphasized that breast milk is a natural food and, therefore, superior to baby formula. Mothers stated that, breastfeeding represents "the ideal nutrition for a baby", "breast milk is a baby food prepared by God", "a natural resource", "a natural food". In this technological age, there is a tendency for people to forget that humans are mammals, and that suckling is the essential behavior to get food for survival. Although the mothers did not fully understand the complexity of human milk, they believed that breast milk was the best food they could give their infants to meet their nutritional needs and ensure their physical health.

5. Duty as a Mother

Duty as a mother contains 5 formulating meanings: a matter of course, mother's will, common sense, natural thing and obligation to her baby.

Breastfeeding becomes a way of validating our womanliness and motherhood (Bottorff, 1990). For mothers, responsibility is an important part of their breastfeeding. The mothers perceived breastfeeding as more than just a way to nourish the infant, but rather than an integral, highly important part of the total mothering process. There is an explicit and overt assumption that breastfeeding is a necessary and integral part of mothering (Harrison, Morse, Prowse, 1985).

Breastfeeding can be a springboard to good mothering. After delivering a baby, mother must do their best for their infant in Korean society. Mothers said that "to give breast milk is a matter of course.", "It represents the mother's will, the mother's true heart.", "Putting the whole mind to their infant is basic common sense.", "happy rewarding.", "It's the most natural thing in the world.", "After delivering the baby, the next obligation is breastfeeding". They are more concerned with the welfare of their babies than themselves.

6. Nurturing

Nurturing contains 3 formulating meanings: bring up, rearer and breeding.

Within modern Western society, breasts are often perceived as sexual objects, yet their primary function of nurturing of the young receives much less attention (Entwistle, 1991). In this study mothers viewed their breastfeeding as a "basic resource for bringing up a child", "a way to bring a baby up on my body fluid", "a great rearer", "postnatal placenta".

7. Mystery

Mystery contains 3 formulating meanings: miracle thing, the marvelous and mystery.

Mothers said that "It's a mystical experience that no one can understand except breastfeeding mothers. It's too difficult to explain. But, without any explanation, breastfeeding mother can feel". For them, It's mysterious because seemingly breast milk appear as "thin". Many mothers were astonished that something that looked like water could provide for all of an infant's nutritional needs for at least six months. One mother said that "the mere thought of her baby, made her breast milk flow".

8. Identity

Identity contains 5 formulating meanings: real mother, an essential being, maturity, broad-mindedness and generosity.

Breastfeeding is an intimate process that requires psychosocial adjustment. Breastfeeding was proposed to require a high level of adjustment to womanly functions. Primigravid women who planned to bottle-feed were found to be more immature, and less receptive to the idea of breastfeeding. These women also expressed more dissatisfaction with being female than women who planned to breastfeed (Margaret, Kearney, 1988). The research on personality and breastfeeding suggests that the typical personality of a breastfeeding mother is someone who is calm, mature, instinctive, independent, devoted, involved in the mothering role, and accepting of the unpredictable nature of child-rearing. This woman is also respectful of her own needs and flexible enough to adapt to the frequent demands of breastfeeding (Call, 1995; Hewat and Ellis, 1984). Some of the subjects' comments included, "After delivering my baby, I still didn't realize that I had become a mother. But, through breastfeeding I came to realize that I am a real mother.", "I am essential to my baby.", "I became patient and

more understanding towards my parents.", "I matured, broadened my mind and became more generous towards other people.", "Through breastfeeding I experienced a strong feeling of satisfaction.", "My mother-in-law regards me as a good mother". Each mother felt gratified from watching her infant grow healthy and strong on the milk that the mother produced and from realizing that her infant recognized the mother as the sole provider of the milk. Breastfeeding gives the mother confidence in her ability to provide for her baby (Eppink, 1969).

One of the main reasons women stop breastfeeding is they lack confidence in their ability to continue producing enough milk. The guilt and unhappiness created by breastfeeding failure may erode confidence in the parenting role. Successful breastfeeding build up a mother's confidence and self- esteem and facilitates acceptance of the maternal role. Thus, a woman's success in breastfeeding her child is intimately related to the aspect of her psychosexual identity.

IV. NURSING IMPLICATION

Breastfeeding is both a psychological and physiological event. Breastfeeding allows closeness, touching, and time for the mother and infant to bond with each other, while providing adequate nutrition and immunity for the infant. There is no questioning the fact that successful breastfeeding bestows significant benefits, both physical and psychological, upon both the mother and baby.

Nurses must use this knowledge to direct their activities in accordance with these determinants of behavior, they should use it to extend the scientific rationale for their nursing practice. Nursing efforts should be directed at helping new families achieve a physically and psychologically healthy start with the breastfeeding schedule that works best for

them. In clinical practice, the nurse should be aware of the impact that a positive attitude, reassurance, and knowledgeable clinical support will have, especially on the first-time breastfeeding mother.

Beliefs and attitudes toward breastfeeding can have major impacts on breastfeeding success. Beliefs are deep-seated phenomena that affect a mother's choice of feeding method and her reactions to the experiences of breastfeeding. The mother's personal experience is affected by the responsiveness of the infant, her feeling of satisfaction with the breastfeeding and the compatibility of breastfeeding with her individual and family life. By being attuned to the mother's personal experience, nurses can promote the sound nature of breastfeeding and assess the need for additional helpful information about breastfeeding.

Cultural differences affect the most important sources of support to new mothers. Nurses need to use knowledge of culturally different clients to plan relevant nursing care. Culturally appropriate promotion of breastfeeding, sensitive cultural assessment helps to gather information regarding cultural characteristics that may affect client's behavior. Strategies for promotion of breastfeeding should be based on an awareness of the cultural understanding to breastfeeding in a particular community.

In this study, the primiparous mothers breastfed their infants successfully. Some mothers, especially primiparas, were occasionally unable to meet their own breastfeeding goals. This may result in disappointment, a loss of self-esteem and perhaps a grieving period. Therefore, the responsibility of the nurse is to assist the mother and provide support when the method of infant feeding changes over time.

This study offers the possibility of better understanding the experience of mothers as they pursue breastfeeding and stimulates further reflection on the meaning of this experience. Insight gained can help to increase our

sensitivity and improve the nursing care we provide to our patients.

The main implication for nursing research from this study is the effect of cultural differences on breastfeeding. There is also need for more studies about breastfeeding from holistic and, cultural perspectives as well as from the mother's perspective. The results of this study were derived from a group of Korean, middle-class mothers, therefore, further investigation is recommended to elicit the beliefs of other cultural and socioeconomic groups,

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