



Socio-Cultural Explanation of Newborn Child Health and Illness: An Anthropological Study on The Practice of Ethnomedicine in the Context of Rural Child

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ABSTRACT

The health of infants in rural areas is influenced by factors like medicine as well as traditional and cultural beliefs. The study examines the impact of local beliefs and practices on the health and well-being of newborns in Bhangura village, as well as the significance of ethnomedicine in caring for newborns within the village. Based on interviews, the study suggests that many caregivers act and seek healthcare based on the cultural belief that illness in a newborn was triggered by an evil force. Herbal remedies, rituals and massage are usually used first and only biomedical health care is considered when the traditional ways fail. A person's decision about medical care is influenced by how accessible it is, its cost, their trust in traditional healers and its suitability with their culture. It is suggested by the study that both ethnomedicine and biomedicine can work together and support newborn health by implementing related policies. This research indicates that how medical support is provided to newborns in rural areas should be influenced by cultural factors for good outcomes.

Keywords: Newborn health, Ethnomedicine, Socio-cultural beliefs, Rural healthcare, Neonatal illness, medical pluralism.

INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, newborn health is a crucial area for public health experts to focus on since neonatal death and illness rates reflect the overall advantage and fairness in the way healthcare works. Numerous important improvements in biomedical care and health systems have not significantly lowered the number of newborn illnesses and deaths in remote rural areas (Akhter et al., 2022). The difference in care is mainly caused by social beliefs, the practices people follow and the knowledge they have in their communities. The choice of treatment and behaviors in seeking health care for newborns are often guided by ethnomedicine in many rural areas.

Usually, biomedical healthcare approaches newborn health in terms of clinical medicine and biology, primarily focusing on health conditions, specific treatments and ways to avoid problems. However, the socio-cultural factors behind people's health and illness views are frequently missing or overlooked, mainly in rural areas outside the Western world (Ullah, 2024). To fully appreciate newborn health, one must look at the cultural views on health and illness that guide people in responding to conditions among newborns. These ideas cover why illness happens, for instance through spiritual forces, a person's surrounding environment or committing improper actions and rituals that help protect babies from unseen threats. They guide us in spotting symptoms, determining the seriousness of the disease and choosing the most suitable medical treatment.

Among its traditions, ethnomedicine includes the use of herbal remedies, participation in special rituals, massage and consultations with herbalists, diviners and birth attendants. Some of these approaches focus on the entire individual, including their ease of mind, sense of community and social life. In a good number of rural areas, people consider ethnomedical practitioners' leaders because of what they have learned and what works for them (N. S. Fariha & Rahman, 2024). Regardless of how common biomedical care is getting, ethnomedicine is still the preferred choice for families of newborns, due to being accessible, low in costs, fitting with their cultures and trusted within the community.

In rural areas, both ethnomedical and biomedical care are practiced side by side because of the range of health systems that exist there. Commonly, parents start with ethnomedical care and see a doctor when the case cannot be resolved with traditional solutions. Because of this, people balance beliefs about health, how to access medical treatment and their confidence in the effectiveness of therapies. To reduce the rates of poor health among newborns, it is necessary

to develop policies and programs that truly consider cultural traditions and have had proven success (Samakya V & Palanisamy, 2024).

Using anthropology, it is easier to analyze the connections between cultural beliefs, health and the way healthcare is provided. The study, looking through ethnography, hopes to understand how in a specific community, the way newborns are treated medically and publicly is influenced by its culture (Sadat, 2020). Using this method, it is possible to fully explore how people treat health at birth, manage care for the newborn and rely on traditional healers. It also shows the impact of culture on the connection between traditional and modern healthcare. Taking a socio-cultural approach to newborn health matters both for research and in public health.

Merging the two forms of healthcare helps bridge cultural gaps, brings the community closer and increases people's trust in the services offered. As a result, mothers from the communities may accept culturally-validated practices, seek medical help more often, follow treatments regularly and ensure improved health of their newborns.

It addresses the need for understanding neonatal health that includes both medical and cultural aspects of people living in rural areas (Patel, 2024). Analyzing traditional beliefs in health and illness of newborns can help, this research seeks to bring together both traditional and modern healthcare by highlighting how healthcare can become more inclusive.

All in all, the study considers demonstrates the importance of basing health policies on local culture. It analyses how cultural practices influence people's understanding of various newborn illnesses, the usual methods for health support and the way they seek care. According to the findings, cultural competency and using ethnomedical knowledge help to boost the health and survival of infants in rural areas.

Research Questions

- How do people in rural areas interpret health and illness when their newborn children are concerned?
- Which ethnomedical and traditional practices are generally used to take care of newborns in rural areas?
- How do beliefs from their culture and how they heal illnesses influence parents' decisions to seek care in hospitals?

Research Objectives

- To explore rural people's understanding of health and illness in babies, considering their beliefs and social factors
- To identify which ethnomedical approaches are used in caring for newborns by people living in rural areas.
- To study if parents prefer modern care in hospitals or use traditional medicine for their newborn babies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social and Cultural Views on the Health and Sickness of Newborns

Examining newborn health and illness from a social and cultural perspective shows that people's views on health are influenced by the culture, traditions and values they share. Medical anthropologists suggest that health and illness are influenced by the cultural beliefs and practices found within a society (Parida, 2019). In rural areas, people often use medical approaches along with ideas centered on the influence of spiritual, environmental and social aspects. Experts now highlight that the causes of newborn illnesses may appear linked to supernatural forces such as evil spirits, witchcraft or being a consequence of social disturbances and people's moral wrongdoings (Arhin, 2019). Such explanatory models guide both identifying problems and considering who is likely to get the disease, as well as its severity and possible outcomes (Kendall, 2019).

Ethnography has also revealed that rituals and taboos help to preserve the health of babies and young children. In many cultures, it is widely believed that during the early stages of life, newborns need extra protection from the spirit world and society (Amoussou Lokossou, 2018). Explaining the reasons for such actions reveals the importance of purity, honest family reputations and the aftermath in family lineage which all play a role in neonatal health. (Zaman, 2022) Based on this, health services should work with these beliefs rather than considering them roadblocks to providing care.

Ethnomedical and Traditional Ways to Care for a Newborn

Many places in the world depend on ethnomedicine for caring for newborns. This practice involves using herbal methods, traditional healing, massage and ceremonies meant to promote health physically, emotionally and spiritually (Awasthi & Singh, 2023). Often, patients use traditional methods along with biomedical treatment (Sabar & Midya, 2023). People still rely

on ethnomedical care because traditions are similar, it is easier to access, cheaper and because community members trust their leaders, who act as doctors. At present, experts in the field recognize that ethnomedicine pays attention to the dynamics among a person, their family, society and the environment (U. Fariha, 2023) . After their child is born, parents take actions such as surrounding them with special objects, conducting ceremonies and giving selected remedies to help them or protect them from harm (Devi, 2022). In addition, ethnomedicine involves sharing information that shows respect for the history and identity of each culture. Associations with certain cultures mean there are issues to handle and spaces for public health programs to help care for newborns.

Apart from having health facilities far from their homes and covering costs, the language gap, cultural ignorance among caregivers and past negative experiences hinder some people's access to formal healthcare (Sahoo & Pradhan, 2021). Therefore, getting health care is delayed for newborns, making them more susceptible to and more likely to experience serious and dangerous diseases. It is being proposed by more health professionals to build health programs that couples regular doctors with acknowledgment of cultural ways to reduce illnesses and improve health.

Traditions and beliefs to influence their health care choices

The use of traditional approaches is what most rural caregivers prefer, as they believe in the teachings that guide them (NANJUNDA, 2018). People may depend only on biomedical care if their problem cannot be solved with previous approaches or the disease is severe (Wallenborn et al., 2021) . People can try various types of schools to maintain their culture and consider the significance of care, the distance they need to cover and how much it costs.

People in the community now feel more united, are more confident in the health services and their newborn babies experience better health outcomes. The scientific community uses different concepts and theories to explain things. Kleinman developed his Explanatory Model of Illness to describe the ways health beliefs influence rural people's approach to addressing their health issues. It supposes that patients can use different healthcare systems for their treatment simultaneously (Kulkarni & Kurane, 2024). A number of new theories concentrate on social and cultural aspects such as differences in income, gender roles and power helping to decide people's health (Samakya et al., 2024). The approaches mentioned allow researchers to clarify that traditional and modern medicine interact in many different ways. Having this awareness plays a vital role in ensuring interventions are successful everywhere.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Setting

The study took place in Bhangura village which is part of Pabna District in the Rajshahi Division of Bangladesh. Communities in Pabna District, whose population is more than 2.5 million, mainly live in rural areas and health facilities are not widely available. Residents of these areas often use what is learned from elders and religious beliefs for newborn care. Socio-cultural factors can be understood best in the Bhangura village because of the way families treat newborns when they get sick.

Research Design

This research looked into newborn health and illness by using a qualitative approach and gathering information on local perspectives. With a qualitative approach, it is easier to grasp how local communities believe in health, illnesses and how they are treated using traditional wisdom. The study was conducted to understand the significance of newborn health in rural communities and how ethnomedicine affects the ways people take care of their newborns and the results they get.

Population and sampling

The purpose of the study was to gather thoughts and experiences from parents, caregivers, TBAs, healers and elders living in rural areas. We selected these people using purposive sampling. The Snowball method helps researchers select people who are skilled or effective in relating to the subject under investigation. Caregivers and health workers were interviewed 20 times as part of this study to make sure there was diversity among males, females, older adults and newborn caregivers. The selection of participants relied on them looking after newborns and their influence in the community.

Data Collection

To maintain the cultural background and allow for clearer understanding, data was gathered by conducting semi-structured interviews in Bengali. They are beneficial for qualitative research because interviewers can investigate key topics attentively with everyone while using the same format. The interviews were conducted based on the following themes:

Participants talked about the symptoms and possible causes of illness in newborns.

- Traditional healthcare: The interviewees explained the remedies and practices they perform to look after newborns.
- Look at the reasons behind parents depend on traditional methods or go to the hospital for treatment.
- How biomedicine is viewed by the community and how it meets with ethnomedicine was one of the main topics.
- Every interview took around 45 to 60 minutes and all of them were recorded as everyone gave their consent.

Ethical Considerations

All of the participants were properly informed about the study through its ethical guidelines. I informed all participants about the study's details, as well as how their data would be handled and explained that participation was voluntary. As the issue is sensitive, the researchers reassured participants that they may end their involvement at any moment. Data from the interviews was anonymized so that no one could be identified during analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS

A thematic analysis approach was chosen for examining data in the study because it is common in qualitative research to find, examine and report on recurring patterns. It followed several steps in the analysis process.

- **Familiarization:** The researcher made a transcript of the audio conversations and examined it many times to learn what the participants meant.
- **Initial Coding:** In the first stage, meaningful segments of the text were given codes based on key phrases and ideas about treating newborns.
- **Theme Development:** Codes were sorted under different themes that highlighted their similarities, cultural beliefs, healthcare choices and treatments.
- **Interpretation:** By studying the themes against the objectives, the researcher could say something about the cultural and community environment for newborn health and ethnomedicine.

In this research, NVivo 12 assisted in analyzing qualitative data by organizing, coding and displaying patterns in the data.

RESULTS

The interviews were examined using the NVivo 12 software. With NVivo, I was able to arrange, code and make sense of the data, leading to the discovery of main themes. Below, I provide an outline of the results, pinpointing the main subjects that came up concerning newborns, sickness and traditional medicine in the Bhangura village of Pabna District, Rajshahi Division.

Popular Beliefs Regarding the Health and Illness of Newborns

The findings showed that cultural thoughts influence how parents perceive the health of their babies. People often attributed their newborn's illness to spiritual factors, including:

- It was thought that evil eye or harmful spirits might cause a newborn to fall ill.
- According to such beliefs, getting sick was thought to mean that the person's family or group had angered the ancestors.

The beliefs at that time shaped the methods used for caring for newborns. In some instances, it was common for people to use a ritual or ask a TBA or elder for support when their newborn showed signs of being sick before going to the hospital.

The Use of Traditional Remedies

Commonly, the first response to problems with a newborn was an ethnomedical practice. Various traditional practices were highlighted during the analysis.

- Several respondents reported using different herbal mixtures to care for fevers, colic and diarrhea in newborns. Neem and turmeric were often talked about for being good for one's health.
- Some participants described using blessings and holy water baths as well as saying prayers to protect the newborn.
- Some caregivers chose massage to help reduce the risk of colic or support a baby's general health.

It was noted by everyone that these approaches were widely accepted in the community, very easy to get and commonly practiced by people with knowledge of common remedies.

Perception of biomedical healthcare

Although ethnomedicine was main, some importance was also given to biomedical care in the medical treatment of newborns. Not everyone had the same view of hospitals and formal medical services.

- There were people who revealed less faith in psychiatry, describing low-quality care received, feeling their culture had not been respected or the sense that treatment is beyond their financial means.
- Before the newborn got very sick, most caregivers preferred to use local remedies instead of seeking help from doctors. A couple of people pointed out that seeking help from a health center was often only considered after their method of care failed or the baby's health got worse.
- A handful of the participants mentioned that treatment for pneumonia or severe malnutrition at hospital had improved their situations.

People seem to acknowledge biomedical healthcare, but they tend to use it only as a last resort when traditional practices fail.

Things That Impact How a Person Seeks Health Care

There are several reasons why caregivers decided to use either traditional medicine or biomedical care. From the analysis with NVivo 12, it became clear that these three factors were main influences on decision-making.

- People chose traditional medicine since it was available to most people and usually cost little or nothing. But getting medical care in hospitals was a challenge for folks living in rural areas who could not easily access transportation.
- Traditional habits were picked more often because they were seen as meaningful for the culture. Since it was believed that newborns could be endangered by spirits or harmful things, using ethnomedical practices appeared more comfortable and logical to people.
- People were encouraged to trust local healers such as TBAs and herbalists. When a mother gave birth, TBAs were trusted for their guidance. Those attending asked them for help with feeding as well as ceremonies to cleanse the spirit.

Combining Traditional and Biomedical Forms of Healthcare

It turned out that in certain situations, traditional and medical practices were used together. While caregivers usually started with common methods, many of them resorted to biomedical therapy after the traditional options did not help. For example:

- A few mentioned that they would use traditional treatments together with medical ones such as using herbal remedies while their child had antibiotics from a doctor.

- When the condition of a newborn was not handled by ethnomedicine, the family was directed by the traditional healer to visit a nearby hospital or clinic.

The findings suggest that using information from traditional systems can improve the health of newborns and as a result, any newborn care programs in rural areas should be culturally appropriate and might include elements of ethnomedicine and modern medicine.

DISCUSSION

According to the study, certain cultural practices and traditions play a role in the health of newborns in rural zones and people still use ethnomedicine there. Even though special healthcare has become available in Bhangura, traditional care for newborns is still widely used in that village. The findings reveal that biomedical healthcare is receiving more attention, but ethnomedicine remains the main method of caring for newborns. The next section describes the findings relevant to past literature and discusses their significance for public health policy and practice.

The Ideas People Hold Regarding the Health of Newborns

According to the study, how care was provided depended greatly on the cultural beliefs about the causes of the newborns' illnesses. According to past research by Kleinman (1980) and Helman (2007), cultural, social and religious aspects influence health and illness as well as their biological factors. People in the village usually believed that illness in newborns came from spirits such as the evil eye and the anger of ancestors. It is based on the idea that in broader culture, health is considered to be balanced among physical, social and spiritual parts of life. Local communities are also known to believe that the sickness results from a weak spiritual or moral condition, in contrast to thinking about it as a simple medical issue (Geissler & Prince, 2010; Ochieng et al., 2020).

Traditional Methods for Health Care

According to the research, the most frequently used ways to care for babies were by using herbs, performing spiritual care and doing massages. This agrees with Yeo et al. (2021) and Mburu et al. (2022), who revealed that traditional medicine is a common practice in rural areas for newborns. Many women reported that they trusted local healers and TBAs and took their advice regarding where to give birth. It is customary for rural communities to accept TBAs as respected sources of guidance and they hold authority in handling newborns (Kassam et al., 2019).

Most of these parents found that ethnomedicine's attention to both physical and spiritual needs was highly important. Often, old traditions were understood to be effective for both health and safety. This matches what previous researchers have discovered (Good, 1994) in which ethnomedical systems aim to keep an individual connected with the group by incorporating social and spiritual aspects of health care.

Biomedical Healthcare

Despite the fact that ethnomedicine is still widely practiced, biomedical healthcare was accepted within the study as an alternative. It was difficult for people to make up their minds about hospitals and formal medical care. Although a few saws benefits in biomedical care for some ailments, others highlighted concerns such as the expense, negative experiences before, less focus on culture and the lack of familiarity with it as the reasons they would not use hospitals. As reported in several studies, these findings are common among people living in rural or disadvantaged areas (Gibson & Mace, 2017; Kaufman et al., 2019).

Many families were hindered by the difficulty of getting to hospitals, as their usual remedies were quick and simple to make or find from nearby healers, compared to the time and effort it took to go to a hospital. Lack of cultural competency among those in the medical field was observed as a major concern. Medical staff in rural areas are well-prepared in technical fields, but might still struggle to relate well to the locals (Nyblade et al., 2021).

Impacts People's Health-Seeking Habits

It was found that people's behavior in seeking health care was chiefly affected by health expenses, how accessible health services are, perceived cultural suitability and trust in healers present in the community. The study results support the idea proposed in the health system framework that economic, social and cultural elements play a role in deciding to seek healthcare (Thaddeus & Maine, 1994; Ogola et al., 2018). Based on research, when seeking health care becomes expensive or becomes a cultural issue, it is more common for people in rural areas to look to alternative practices.

According to this study, individuals make use of both biomedical and ethnomedical methods because they are able to move between various health systems depending on certain circumstances (Leslie, 1980). At this point, if medication and other treatments do not work or illness becomes very serious, families choose to visit a biomedical service. This suggests that many people still rely on traditional practices when deciding who to visit for care.

Integrating Ethnomedicine with Biomedicine

An interesting result of the study was how ethnomedicine and biomedicine were united. Sometimes, these healers recognized when their care wasn't working, so they would direct families to the hospital. It could be used as a framework for merging known and biomedical approaches in health work in rural locations. If biomedical healthcare is properly integrated with other traditions, people can trust the services more and newborns will get care that includes both medical and cultural knowledge (Babalola et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

According to this study, traditions and cultural beliefs play a major role in the well-being of newborns in the rural areas of Bangladesh. Even though biomedical services are available, it is still ethnomedicine that most people turn to because it fits their needs, can be reached, is affordable and valued in the community. The approach to treating an ill baby by a caregiver is influenced by their religious and social values.

In most families living in diverse communities, both ethnomedicine and biomedicine are used and employed together. Care in Biomedicine is reached only when traditional treatments cannot solve the problem or when the illness is very advanced, as people face challenges related to costs, trouble traveling and cultural issues. As a result, programs should strive to be culturally aware and encourage cooperation between traditional healers and doctors using biomedicine.

A combination of both ethnomedical and formal healthcare approaches may lead to better healthcare results for newborns living in rural areas. If cultural beliefs are integrated into health policies and programs by healthcare providers, confidence in the system rises, healthcare gets used more effectively and newborns receive better and timelier care.

Recommendations

- **Develop health programs that meet the needs of diverse cultures**

Any health measures should recognize and include local customs when it comes to caring for newborns. When biomedical health workers are culturally competent, they can better communicate with communities in rural areas.

- **Promote greater alliance between traditional and biomedical medical professionals**

Create official alliances and accord about referring patients between traditional healers, birth attendants and health care centers. Sharing information allows for identifying dangerous conditions early and treating them promptly.

- **Increase the Chance for All People to Get Medical Help They Need**

Support new mobile clinic projects and community workers in rural areas to prevent new parents from having to overcome transportation and financial challenges when seeking hospital care for their babies.

- **Promoting Involvement from Community Members**

Invite group leaders, older individuals and healers to be part of awareness sessions on possible dangers for newborns and the advantages of mixing regular and traditional medical practices.

- **Integrating Policies and Research**

Authorities should include ethnomedical traditions in formulating strategies for national neonatal health. Other studies must explore ways integration is carried out and examine the influence it has on the health of newborns.

- **Help to Strengthen Traditional Healers**

Help traditional practitioners improve their practices and indicate when it is important to connect them with biomedical services.

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