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The Impact of Doulas on Breastfeeding in Black Women: a Literature Review

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Abstract

This literature review was conducted to explore the impacts doulas have on breastfeeding initiation and continuation in the Black population. Black women's breastfeeding and continuation is exceptionally low compared to white women and other races and ethnicities. Six journal articles were used to examine the relationships that doulas have on breastfeeding initiation and continuation in black communities. There was an array of study designs found throughout the articles to help support the doula and breastfeeding relationship in Black women. The results of this literature review were preliminarily positive, but more evidence is required to firmly establish the positive impact of doulas on breastfeeding initiation and continuation among Black mothers.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Although breastfeeding can help lower health risk factors not many Black mothers choose this feeding mode for their children. The national average for breastfeeding in the United States is 83%, but 26% of Black babies are breastfed during infancy (CDC, 2022). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention states breastfeeding is a health investment and not just a lifestyle decision (2022). Babies are recommended to be exclusively breastfed for the first six months to invest in their health and lower risk factors such as asthma, obesity, ear infections, and sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) (USDA, n.d.). Breastfeeding can also benefit mothers by reducing the risk of high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, and ovarian/breast cancer (USDA, n.d.).

Black mothers face disparities in breastfeeding after birth preventing them from having the chance to initiate breastfeeding and continue beyond the first tries of initiation (Gillespie, 2021). A previous CDC study demonstrates this problem where hospitals that primarily serve Black women do not offer feeding and lactation services to the mothers and immediately offer the mothers formula rather than a chance to initiate breastfeeding (Santhanam, 2019). Doula's can play an integral role in starting and continuing breastfeeding in the population by bridging the gap in cultural differences, eliminating implicit bias, and intimately working with families to create feeding plans tailored to their lifestyles (Crumpler, 2022).

The purpose of this literature review is to describe how doula's affect breastfeeding initiation and continuation among the Black population.

Chapter 2: Background

Breastfeeding has been around since the beginning of human existence. It has biologically evolved to be the best food source for a baby until they reach six months of age, when solid food can be introduced as a complementary source of nutrients until they are 12 months old (DeVane-Johnson et al., 2018). There has been an increase in breastfeeding initiation, but a disparity for initiation and continuation remains among African American women (Kozhimannil et al., 2013). Only 74.1% of non-Hispanic black women ever breastfeed while 90.8% of non-Hispanic Asians have this highest rate and right behind them is non-Hispanic white women at 85.3% (CDC, 2023).

Some of the barriers found in the literature that might keep Black mothers from initiating or continuing breastfeeding are lack of maternal access to information and support, language and literacy barriers, lifestyle choices such as tobacco and alcohol use, and lack of support or acceptance socially and at work (Jones et al., 2015). Mothers may also find it hard to find a support community of other breastfeeding mothers who look like them because formula is so often pushed onto black mothers rather than the education and support to breastfeed (Crumpler, 2022). The stigma for breastfeeding in the African American culture reaches back to slavery when slaves had to feed their owners children at the expense of their own causing stigma and shame to become generational (2022). The demands of slave labor also are mirrored today in mothers needing to quickly return to work because of a lack of maternity leave and support from their employer to breastfeed or pump milk while at work. Many barriers are preventing black mothers an equal opportunity to initiate breastfeeding and thus continue too.

Doulas hold a cultural significance in the prenatal and postpartum periods of the Black community. A doula is a labor assistant without formal clinical training but provides support

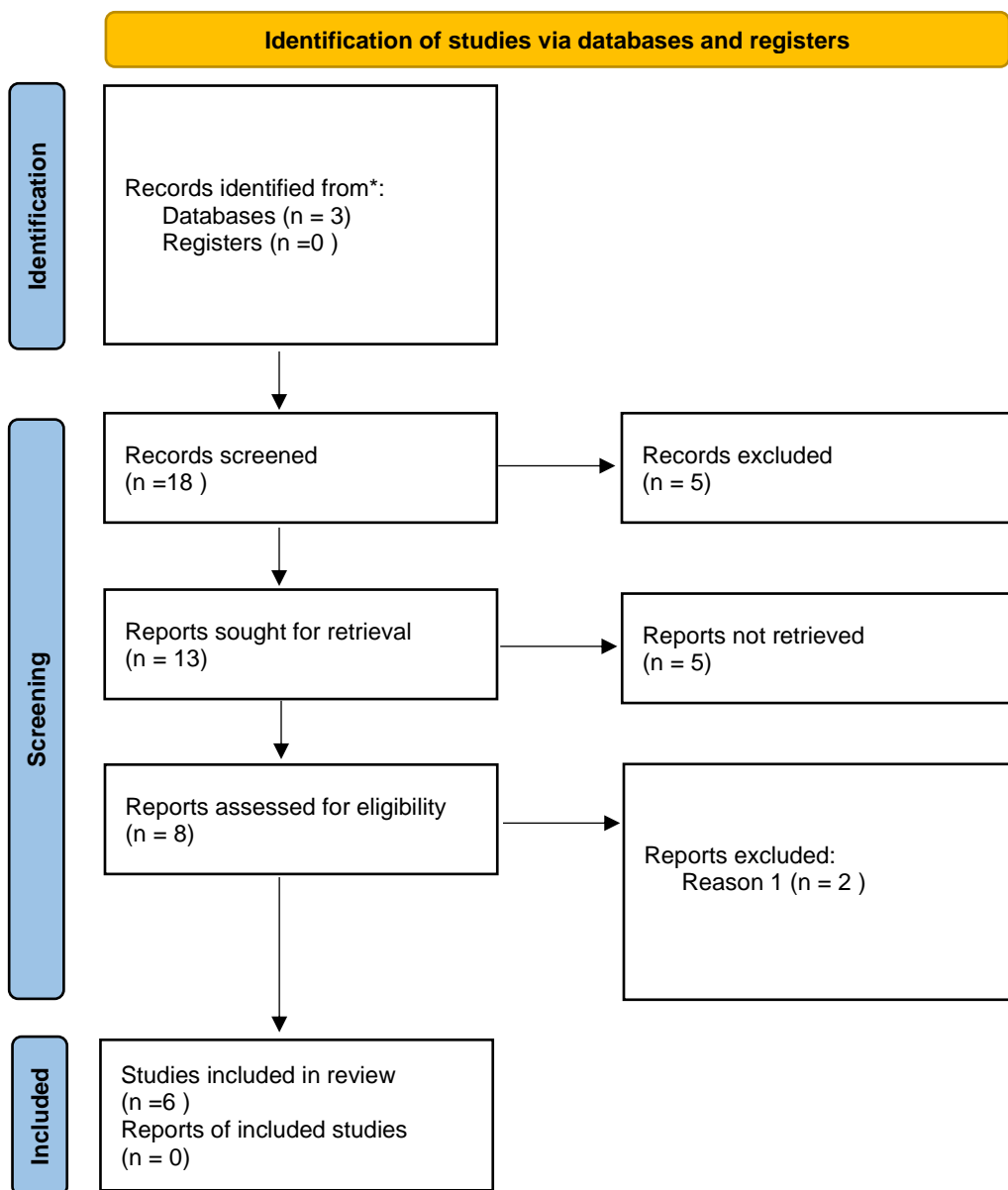
physically and emotionally to an individual before, during, and after birth (Butler Tobah, 2021). To become a doula, one must be trained to be a birth or postpartum doula and then can be certified through Doula of North America (DONA) as a certified doula and then begin assisting mothers and families before, during and after birth. DONA International is now the largest organization for doula certification. This organization provides curriculum for both birth and postpartum doulas.

During slavery, doulas were called granny midwives (National Museum of African American History & Culture, n.d.). They supported the enslaved women during birth as there was no medical care for them. Also, they would assist in the deliveries of their masters' wives. Today they bring great support from the prenatal period to the postpartum period improving outcomes in breastfeeding (Acquaye & Spatz, 2021).

This literature review will fill a gap in the literature on the niche topic of doula support in breastfeeding initiation and continuation among black mothers.

Chapter 3: Methods

The population evaluated is African American women and birthing individuals in the United States during the 21st century. The College of Public Health library liaison supported this literature review search. A template was used to organize concepts, keywords, and databases related to specific search strategies. Several databases were included in the search such as PubMed, CINAHL, and Embase. Boolean terms and controlled vocabulary were used within each database search. The three concepts identified were: African American women, community trained doulas and breastfeeding.



PubMed uses controlled vocabulary MeSH (medical subject headings). The concepts were entered into the MeSH search box to find results that would assist in searching this database. The search strategy for PubMed was then created and came back with eight results. Embase has a similar controlled vocabulary to MeSH called Emtree which was searched to aid in extracting the most results from this database. Five results returned from this strategy. CINAHL also uses MeSH which came back with five results. There was a total of 18 results, but only 6 met search criteria and were not duplicates.

The articles included in this review address the roles and efficacy of doulas in supporting breastfeeding among Black women. Articles were included in the review if they were published between 2000-2023, included Black women, written in English, took place in the United States, had the presence of a doula, and reported the outcomes of breastfeeding duration and initiation.

Zotero is an app and website plug in was used to organize relevant literature and create citations and bibliographies. Articles were first screened for title and abstract and then full text. Data extracted from included articles organized in an Excel spreadsheet with the authors, title, study design/method, and themes.

Quality assessment was conducted with JBI Critical Appraisal tool (*JBI Critical Appraisal Tools* / JBI, n.d.) documents for each type of study design to check for quality of the article.

Author/s	Title	Study Design/Method	Theme
Tara F. Deubel, Elizabeth M Miller, Ivonne Hernandez, Micah Boyer, Adetola Louis-Jacques	Perceptions and Practices of Infant Feeding among African American Women	Qualitative Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breastfeeding Initiation
Katy Backes Kozhimannil, PhD, MPA, Laura B. Attanasio, BA, Rachel R. Hardeman, MPH, and Michelle O'Brien, MD, MPH	Doula care supports near-universal breastfeeding initiation among diverse, low-income women	Cross Sectional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breastfeeding initiation
Ramey-Collier, Khaila BS; Jackson, Maya CBD, SMC; Malloy, Angela MAT, IBCLC, CBD, CBDT, AC-CBE; McMillan, Cindy CD (DONA) CBD, CBE, NCPSS, CBFPC; Scraders-Pyatt, Andora CBD; Wheeler, Sarah M. MD	Doula Care: A Review of Outcomes and Impact on Birth Experience	Literature review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breastfeeding initiation • Breastfeeding continuation
Lydia Furman, Lisa Matthews, Caleria Davis, Steve Killpack, Mary Ann O'Riordan	Breast for Success: A Community–Academic Collaboration to Increase Breastfeeding Among High-Risk Mothers in Cleveland	Community based participatory research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breastfeeding initiation • Breastfeeding continuation
Adetola F Louis-Jaques, Tara F. Deubel, Shanda Vereen, Ivonne Hernandez, Melina Taylor, Elizabeth M. Miller, Ronée Wilson	Doula Perspectives on Lactation Education and Breastfeeding Support for Diverse, Low-income Women: A Field Report	Qualitative research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breastfeeding initiation • Breastfeeding continuation

Renee C. Edwards, PhD; Matthew J. Thullen, PhD; Jon Korfmacher, PhD; John D. Lantos, MD; Linda G. Henson, MA; Sydney L. Hans, PhD	Breastfeeding and Complementary Food: Randomized Trial of Community Doula Home Visiting	Randomized Control Trial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breastfeeding initiation • Breastfeeding continuation
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Chapter 4: Results

Six journal articles were included in this literature review based on search criteria and after duplicates were removed. Deubel et al. (2019) outlined a qualitative pilot study of 20 African American women who delivered at an Urban Hospital in Florida. Khalia Ramey-Collier et al. (2013) was a literature review of doula care and its impact on the birth experience. Kozhimannal et al. (2013) was a cross sectional study that found that African American women supported by a doula had almost a 92.7 % breastfeeding initiation. Furman et al. (2016), conducted a community-based participatory research study that analyzed culturally appropriate breastfeeding education and doula support in Cleveland for African American women. Edwards et al. (2013) studied home visiting by doulas for young African American mothers in a randomized control trial. And Louis-Jacques et al., 2022 was another qualitative research study that provided a unique viewpoint from the perspective of doulas who serve.

Breastfeeding Initiation

Breastfeeding can be a hard journey for some mothers and a walk in the park for others (Crumpler 2022), but initiation is important for both mother and child to lead healthy and successful lives.

One article mentioned some common roadblocks expressed by mothers and doulas were
1) women's perceptions of infant preferences for formula and fears of creating infant dependency

on breastfeeding mothers, 2) structural constraints that necessitate returning to work soon after childbirth, and 3) a lack of peer support systems to model successful breastfeeding and provide advice to overcome problems (Deubel et al., 2019). A doula intervention allowed the women to persevere through the roadblocks experienced while breastfeeding. Kozhimannal et al. (2013) found that African American women supported by a doula had almost a 92.7 % breastfeeding initiation. One thousand sixty-nine women were compared for their initiation rates as they were provided doula support and had a Medicaid-covered birth. This study found that women who had a doula and were receiving Medicaid had a 17.1% higher initiation rate than other Medicaid-covered women without a doula. The African American initiation rate was 22.4% higher than the rest of the Medicaid. This doula group provided culturally appropriate services that helped these women navigate and initiate breastfeeding. In this article's discussion portion, the authors highlight that having a culturally trained doula can help diminish income and racial or ethnic disparities and make universal breastfeeding initiation attainable.

Louis-Jacques et al., 2022 provides a unique viewpoint from the perspective of doulas who serve. The results found five common themes among from the doulas perspective about the importance of doula access and care for African American women who are low income, 1) the perceived benefits of doula care for women, (2) the need for lactation education, (3) the supportive role of doulas in breastfeeding initiation and exclusivity, (4) perceived milk insufficiency, and (5) early termination of breastfeeding due to breastfeeding maintenance barriers.

The third article was a literature review of doula care and its impact on the birth experience. Khalia Ramey-Collier et al. (2023) echoes the improved outcome of breastfeeding initiation and continuation with support from a doula in a birthing woman. It also highlights

studies that include infant after-practice, such as using car seats and placing on the back to sleep, which is also beneficial to the health and well-being of an infant just as much as breastfeeding (Ramey-Collier et al., 2023).

Edwards et al. (2013) studied home visiting by doulas for young African American mothers. Low breastfeeding rates are prevalent in very young mothers (under age 22 for the study). Unfortunately, it is common for this demographic to introduce complementary foods too early, where the doula home visiting plan assists in continuing breastfeeding and properly introducing solid foods (Edwards et al., 2013). Doulas saw moms starting during pregnancy up until three months postpartum. Having a doula present helped these women adhere to breastfeeding and introduced solid food guidelines. In this instance, the doulas were helpful and created bonds with the mothers starting during pregnancy that stemmed from so much time together and sharing similar cultural backgrounds.

Breastfeeding Continuation

Getting started with breastfeeding is important but also following CDC recommendations for breastfeeding for at least six months is also a struggle for the Black population of women. Research and results did not produce a conclusive result as to whether doulas had an impact or not on continuation which implies more research must be done.

Louis-Jacques et al., 2022 had one doula state that her clients continue to breastfeed because of the information given to them on the importance of breastfeeding and the consistent encouragement and troubleshooting techniques when the mothers reach a roadblock in their breastfeeding continuation (Louis-Jacques et al., 2022). The doula's lactation education also

played an integral role in breastfeeding initiation and maintenance among this population despite the perceived barriers (Louis-Jacques et al., 2022). A study in the article by Khalia Ramey-Collier et al. (2023) that was a perspective cohort found that doula-assisted care led to 89% of women breastfeeding six weeks postpartum versus only 40% of women who received standard care without a doula.

Quality Assessment

Quality assessment was performed using the JBI tools for each study design. For this literature review there was an array of study designs, but there were two qualitative studies. Each study question was relevant to the study or review being performed and had to do with breastfeeding in Black populations which related to this literature review. Every study that had a study population had an appropriate sample size for the study being conducted. Each study was adding something new to the topic of breastfeeding initiation and continuation such as introducing complementary foods too early, home visiting, doula assisted births for Medicaid covered births and, doula perspectives on breastfeeding initiation and continuation in the Black population. Study design was appropriate for the research question being answered. Overall the studies and one review used for this literature review were outstanding and provided great information and resources pertaining the literature review topic of the impact of doulas on breastfeeding initiation and continuation in Black populations. All reviews expressed the need for more research on the Black population and doulas impacts on breastfeeding to corroborate their findings and solidify their positive findings that doulas do provide a great resource for Black mothers to imitate and continue breastfeeding.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This literature review was conducted to explore the impact of doulas on breastfeeding initiation and continuation in Black populations. Six articles were reviewed for this literature review, doula programs should be expanded and promoted. Especially for African American women, to help bridge gaps in problems, fear of “spoiling” and over attachment, perception of infant feeding preferences, preference of formula by the infant, and lack of positive breastfeeding role models, that hinder breastfeeding initiation and continuation in this population. And each provided unique insight into the impact that doulas have on breastfeeding in Black mothers. Culturally appropriate doulas had preliminary findings suggesting they provide a great resource for women prenatally and postnatally during breastfeeding initiation, but more research is needed for continuation after 6 months. Breastfeeding is important to sustain for at least the first six months of life before supplemental foods are introduced and to lessen the chances of the mother and child developing health implications later such as diabetes, asthma, breast cancer, and obesity. But there was not much research found in the literature about the continuation beyond 6 months which some mothers choose. This review also primarily looked at a doula rather than more specifically a postpartum doula which helps with the “fourth trimester” or the first six weeks after birth (Todd, 2023). Breastfeeding continuation beyond the first initial tries of initiation would fall to a postpartum doula which not all families choose to hire as well, but they can also support breastfeeding continuation. Breastfeeding sets future generations health up for success which is especially needed in the African American population who suffer far greater health complications and comorbidities than their white counterparts. Initiation and continuation of breastfeeding is very critical to the future health of Black children and their mothers.

In healthcare settings to promote more breastfeeding among black mothers they could incorporate recommendations from UNICEF/WHO's baby friendly hospital initiative, have those who care for mothers and children receive breastfeeding education, ensure all mothers have access to board certified lactation consultants (General, 2011), and a culturally trained doula if they choose one.

Employers can also help mothers breastfeed as well by providing a clean place for them to breastfeed or pump, establish maternity leave for employed mothers, and start and maintain lactation support programs for employees (2011).

This literature review provided a unique perspective of doulas impacts on Black mothers and their breastfeeding continuation and initiation journeys but could not come to a conclusive conclusion on what the impact doulas truly hold on breastfeeding in black women. 2 of the 6 studies were qualitative studies which were unable to provide actual rates and data, but just stories from mothers and doulas about their experiences with breastfeeding initiation and in the study and out of the 20 women only 4 chose to have a doula.

A strength of the study was exploring the Black population but could also be looked at as a limitation as findings may not be able to fit to other races and ethnicities. Only looking at this demographic was also mentioned as a limitation in some of the studies performed and they also indicated their findings might not be applicable to other populations as well. Another limitation for this study is the number of studies found to review and the use of only three search engines. Some other strengths of my review are it is reproducible by other researchers, its comprehensible, and precise in stating the outcomes of the impact of doulas on breastfeeding initiation and continuation of Black communities.

An implication for future research is to study other race/ethnic groups to see if results and conclusions carry over regarding the positive impact doulas have on breastfeeding and determining if the results and conclusions are applicable to other populations as well. There should also be more studies on a wider range of socioeconomic groups rather than primarily low-income Black women to also see if results and conclusions are applicable to them. Doulas are significantly underutilized especially by populations who would benefit from them the most based on research found in this study and a suggested policy change would be to have doula care covered by insurance whether it be private employer insurance or by Medicaid. Policymakers can also support breastfeeding by supporting nonprofit organizations that promote breastfeeding in black communities, compliance with the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes, increase funding for breastfeeding research, and better tracking of the rates of breastfeeding and the factors that affect breastfeeding (2011). Doulas can cost a significant out of pocket amount making them unattainable to a large population of women, but they could provide such a positive impact during prenatal, birth and postpartum period they should be made more attainable for all populations not just the ones who can afford them.

Conclusion

Overall doulas could be a great resource to women in postpartum who are looking to initiate breastfeeding and continue their breastfeeding journeys as well, but more research needs to be conducted to reach a solid conclusion. Breastfeeding is the most important source of food for a child for at least the first six months of life and provides tremendous health benefits for both mom and baby. Black women still lag when it comes to breastfeeding continuation and

maintenance, but doulas have shown some improvement in the numbers for this population and should be considered when this population needs childbirth and lactation education.

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