

CONVERSATIONS WITH MOTHERS WHO ABANDON THEIR NEWBORNS

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Safe Haven Laws

Newborn Abandonment

Feminist Theory

Purpose: In 1999, thirteen newborns were abandoned by their birth mothers in the Houston metropolitan area during a ten-month period spurring "Safe Haven" legislation in Texas and more than 40 other states. While the practice of newborn abandonment has always existed, explanations for the existence of this phenomenon in contemporary society are varied and unsubstantiated. No formal nursing research on this topic was found in the literature. Therefore, this study was designed to gain insight into the life events of the mother who has abandoned her newborn. Utilizing feminist theory to guide the study, women were empowered by sharing their stories and had the opportunity to offer strategies they would have found helpful in preventing the abandonment. The purpose of this study was to attempt to create a profile of the woman at risk, elicit ideas or strategies for prevention from the woman's perspective, determine the accessibility and feasibility of interviewing these women within the constraints of the criminal justice system, and suggest direction for future study.

Method: This exploratory field study used a phenomenological qualitative design to elicit the thoughts and feelings of women who have chosen to abandon their newborns in unsafe public places. Via a scripted, audio taped, one-to-one interview, in-depth and open-ended questions were asked of study participants regarding their childhood family life and friends, health and sexual history, account of the alleged abandonment incident, and current relationships and life situation. The average amount of time to conduct the interview was approximately two hours. A monetary award of \$50 was given to the study participant if allowed by the system in which she is housed. Preliminary data analysis consisted of transcribing and reading the interviews, creating descriptive coding categories to capture the women's life experiences, and applying these coding categories to the interview data. These categories will be used to construct larger conceptual themes and compared within and across participants.

Findings: A convenience sample of approximately 10 individuals meeting study criteria was sought who were willing to describe their experiences with newborn abandonment. There is a very small overall population of women who meet study criteria and there is great difficulty in locating them. Working with the criminal justice system imposes additional barriers to interviewing the women. The diversity of responses of the first women interviewed indicated that several more women need to be interviewed before any common themes can be accurately identified. Early emerging themes include isolation, desperation, spirituality, and strength. There was no common demographic characteristic such as age or ethnicity making it nearly impossible to create a profile of women at risk for abandoning their newborns.

Discussion: Based on current societal norms, newborn abandonment and neonaticide are no longer considered acceptable practices. Health care providers play a vital role in addressing this issue and have the potential to impact the lives of thousands of women and newborns worldwide. Developing strategies to care for mothers who chose to manage their pregnancies and deliveries in secret is a very difficult undertaking. The enactment of rudimentary legislation does not provide an end to the issues of newborn abandonment and neonaticide – it is merely a beginning. Continued interdisciplinary strategizing and general awareness are needed as catalysts to build support programs for pregnant women and unwanted newborns.