

Black Women in Menopausal Transition

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To describe the experience of menopausal symptoms of midlife Black women in the United States.

Design: Qualitative online forum using a feminist perspective.

Setting: Internet communities for midlife women and Blacks.

Participants: Twenty midlife Black women recruited using a quota sampling method.

Methods: A 6-month online forum was conducted with seven discussion topics on menopausal symptoms. The discussion topics were posted sequentially on the forum site, and the women posted messages at their convenience over 6 months. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Results: The identified themes were raised to be strong, accepting a natural aging process, silent and without knowledge, and our own experience. The women tried to be strong during their menopausal transitions while dealing with other important family matters. The women did not report their menopausal symptoms and were silent about or downplayed their symptoms, but many emphasized the importance of education about menopausal symptoms and highlighted their own lack of knowledge. These women generally did not talk about their symptoms because they believed that nobody except other Black midlife women could understand their menopausal experience.

Conclusion: Health care providers need to develop a mechanism to deliver the necessary knowledge about menopausal symptoms and management strategies to Black midlife women in their health care practices.

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Recently, researchers have begun to look for ethnic differences in the menopausal symptom experience (Crandall, Crawford, & Gold, 2006; Gold et al., 2006, 2007; Helenius, Korenstein, & Halm, 2007). In addition, a few epidemiologists have discussed the frequency of certain types of menopausal symptoms broken down by ethnicity and other characteristics, such as smoking status, physical activity, diet, and soy consumption (Crandall et al.; Gold et al., 2006, 2007; Helenius et al.). These studies suggested that menopause might have racial and ethnic contexts that were not fully explained by existing quantitative study methods (Bromberger et al., 2001). Indeed, researchers have failed to report on how diverse ethnic groups of midlife women actually perceived or experienced menopause and menopausal symptoms within the unique psycho-socio-cultural contexts of their daily lives.

During the past decade, several qualitative studies on women's menopausal symptom experience have also been conducted, and the findings indicated that meanings and experiences of menopause and menopausal symptoms are different, depending on

where, when, and how these were investigated (Lock, 1993; Melby, Lock, & Kaufert, 2005). Furthermore, researchers, especially feminist researchers, have suggested that the menopause experience needs to be defined more broadly than as just a specific set of symptoms because the meanings of the symptoms could be diverse depending on the culture within which they are experienced (Best, 2002; Dillaway, Byrnes, Miller, & Rehan, 2008; Lock).

Despite an increasing number of studies on the menopausal experience of Black midlife women, the quantitative studies that have been published indicated that Blacks experienced more vasomotor symptoms than did midlife women of other ethnicities (Avis et al., 2001; Freeman et al., 2001; Gold et al., 2006). Also, researchers reported that prevalent or severe symptoms in Black midlife women differed from those of other ethnic groups (Freeman et al.; Hudson, Taylor, Lee, & Gillis, 2005). The most prevalent symptoms in Blacks were fatigue, headaches, cramps, night sweats, and depression (Hudson et al.). Blacks reported more physiological symptoms (e.g., hot flashes, dizziness, poor

Black midlife women used inner power to cope with menopausal symptoms within the contexts of their daily lives as marginalized ethnic minority women.

coordination/clumsiness, urine leakage, and vaginal dryness) than Whites did (Freeman et al.).

Several qualitative studies on the menopause experience of Black midlife women indicated slightly different findings about symptom experience from those in the quantitative studies (Pham, Grisso, & Freeman, 1997; Sommer et al., 1999). Blacks were significantly more positive in their attitudes toward menopause and menopausal symptoms than were women of other ethnicities (Pham et al.; Sommer et al.). The prevalent management strategies for menopausal symptoms used by Black midlife women were "faith," "think," "accept," or "value/believe/forgive self" (Hudson et al., 2005). Despite these findings, it is still not clear why these women chose these management strategies for their highly prevalent menopausal symptoms. What Miles and Malik asserted in 1994 is still true today: little data exist on the menopausal symptom experience of Black women that could provide additional clarity on this issue.

The purpose of this study was to describe the menopausal symptom experiences of Black midlife women in the United States from their own perspectives in a 6-month online forum. The study presented was part of a larger study on the menopausal symptom experiences of midlife women in the United States from four major ethnic groups (Non-Hispanic Whites, Non-Hispanic Blacks, Non-Hispanic Asians, and Hispanics). In this article, only the findings from the online forum for Black women are reported. Findings from the online forums for women in the other ethnic groups can be found elsewhere (Im, Liu, Dormire, & Chee, 2008).

Theoretical/Philosophical Basis

Because this study was a part of a larger study of the four major ethnic groups of midlife women in the United States (Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians), we used a broader feminist perspective instead of a more focused Black feminist perspective, which may be a better fit for this specific population. From a feminist perspective, menopausal experience is laden with cultural myths and ignorance in most patriarchal cultures, and women in menopause are often viewed as medicalized, oppressed, neglected, and ignored (Andrist &

MacPherson, 2001; Klima, 2001; Lock, 2001; Loppie & Keddy, 2002; Murtagh & Hepworth, 2003). Indeed, in some cultures, menopause is considered a taboo subject veiled in secrecy and silence. Furthermore, a feminist perspective transforms menopause from a disease that should be treated by gynecologists and psychiatrists to a natural biological event in the reproductive cycle of women (Andrist & MacPherson; Klima; Lock; Loppie & Keddy; Murtagh & Hepworth). The feminist perspective maintains that the disease model of menopausal symptoms has been used to gain social control over women, power, and profits for more than 150 years. This perspective was adopted for this study (Voda, 1997).

Within this feminist perspective, the authors used a feminist approach suggested by Im (2007) to guide this study. In this study, it was assumed that the menopausal symptom experience of Black midlife women came from their continuous interactions with their psycho-socio-cultural environments and from biases reflecting the ways they and their health care providers view the world. The researchers also listened to and uncovered Black women's own perspectives, views, values, attitudes, and opinions about their experiences. In addition, throughout the research process, one priority was to listen to and understand women's own views and thus uncover the women's own experiences with menopausal symptoms. Gender and ethnicity were considered significant characteristics that circumscribed women's menopausal symptom experience. Also, the possible influences of cultural and societal contexts of the women's daily lives on their menopausal symptoms experiences were carefully examined. Finally, using several strategies, the researchers tried to establish trust and shorten the distance between these women and themselves.

Methods

This study consisted of a 6-month qualitative online forum for Black midlife women in the U.S. The Institutional Review Board of the institution to which the researchers are affiliated approved this study.

Sample and Settings

The recruitment settings included Internet communities for midlife women (ICMWs) and Internet communities specifically for African Americans (ICAAs). The popularity of ICMWs as a research resource has been reported in the literature; ICMWs

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