



New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Advances in Pure and Applied Science



Issue 10 (2018) 97-103

www.propaas.eu

ISSN: 2547-880X

Selected Paper of 2nd International Congress of Nursing
(ICON-2018) 13–15 April 2018 Marmara University, Faculty of Health Sciences
Department of Nursing–Istanbul, Turkey

Cultural practices before and during pregnancy: example of Turkey

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Suggested Citation:

Sahin, E. & Sahin, H. N. (2018). Cultural practices before and during pregnancy: example of Turkey. *New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Advances in Pure and Applied Sciences*. [Online]. 10, 97–103. Available from: www.propaas.eu

Selection and peer review under responsibility of Prof. Dr. Nesrin Nural, *Kardeniz Technical University*, Turkey.

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Abstract

Having children is a substantial part of cultural identity in our society. From past till now, various customs, traditions and beliefs have been applied, especially during pre-pregnancy and pregnancy period in Anatolia. Some of them are still in practice and effective. However, all these practices to have children are applied generally to women, and there are few practices applied on men regarding the elimination of infertility because women are regarded as responsible for not having children in Anatolia. In this compilation, the traditional beliefs and practices applied before and during pregnancy in Anatolia are explained. National and international articles on this subject are analysed by using keywords in Google academic database. As a result, it is found that some practices negatively affect both the mother's and child's health. So, awareness on this subject should be raised, unhealthy practices and beliefs should be discussed and changed, and beneficial ones should be supported.

Keywords: Traditional practices, intercultural nursing, traditional beliefs, pregnancy, culture.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, especially in developing countries, many mothers and fathers lose their lives because of health problems experienced during pregnancy, birth and the postnatal period. This situation called as 'Maternal and child health problems' continues to be a primary problem in our country too. One of the most important activities to prevent this is to educate on prenatal, birth and postnatal care and education services (Cakirer & Caliskan, 2010). But there are still countless ongoing traditional beliefs and practices that start from birth and continue about various parts of life. Some of them are still in practice and dominant changing from area to area, family to family and person to person (Gozum & Tezel, 2003; Hotun, 1990; Oguz & Kasimoglu, 2005). Social and cultural structure has a heterogeneous characteristic in Turkey. It is a structure which includes population groups combining traditional and modern with profound distinctions. While life perspective of the people, especially who live in big cities shows similarities with the Western world, people who live in the country have a more conservative and traditional perspective (Katebi, 2002). Babies are a value which has many different economic, psychological and social aspects. Baby's birth is often something that makes mothers, fathers, relatives and even neighbours happy because it enables strengthening the marriage, developing bonds in family and the continuation of family (Kahriman, 2007). With the birth of a baby, the mother is saved from the incompetency of being a tree without a fruit, tastes the pleasure and supremacy of being a mom, and her dignity in the family improves. And as for father, he is also proud of proving his manhood (Kahriman, 2007; Tortumluoglu, 2005). Not only traditions and customs but also folk beliefs have a wide place in our culture. Although these are hearsays that have no scientific ground, most of them are still preserved in the society. And while they are evaluated as superstitions from time to time, there is no generally accepted description for the concept of superstitious beliefs and actions because the things that seem weird and superstitious to some people can be normal facts and common situations for others (Choudhry, 1997). From these traditional practices, especially the ones that have the possibility to affect health negatively should be changed, incomplete ones should be completed and positive ones should be improved. It is only possible to accomplish all these by knowing the traditional beliefs and practices of society (Cakirer & Caliskan, 2010).

2. Literature review

2.1. Cultural beliefs and practices during pre-pregnancy period

Every society wants a child right after marriage. Womanhood and motherhood are gained on this basis. Each married woman is expected to perform this role. Women reach their desired positions in this way. Family and relative bonds that are developed as a result of harmonisation process are important factors that encourage or limit to having children. The need for children in the country is increased by the continuation of family as a social structure and transfer of heritage, the need for manpower in economical actions, the increasing power in the relative groups according to the number of people and some opportunities (social, financial or emotional in group or outside the group support, etc.) gained with this power (Artun, 2012, s. 150).

The beliefs and practices relating to pregnancy and birth start with the desire of being pregnant and affect the woman, her family and surroundings. In our society, pregnant women are expected to adopt many beliefs and traditions during the period that starts from the beginning of pregnancy and continues till birth. Married couples are expected to have babies right after their marriage in many parts of Anatolia. A young child is given to the bride's arms on the first day she comes to the groom's house with her bridal dress in order to make her pregnant immediately. The desire for children is expressed to the bride with these actions. Another expression for the desire for children is the first meal that the bride has in the groom's house. There is the tradition of cooking eggs for the bride as her first meal in the groom's house. The desire for the bride's being fertile as a chicken and having children often easily lies in the origin of this tradition (Teke, 2005).

Turkish people who want to have children give food to the hungry, clothes to the naked and wish for the prayers from the sacred people to have the God's blessing. There are examples of this belief in Dede Korkut principalities. In those times, Oguz Beys thought that when they opened their hands and clapped to the sky, the God would not turn down their wishes, and the wishes of people who could not have children would come true in this way. Again, we can see in this bey that the women who want a child would pour water into the (dried) streams as their hair. It is emphasised in our some epics that people who want to have children should lie in places with apple, by the sacred ponds or the graves of the ancestors (Kalafat, 2010, s. 243).

Tying knots to the mausoleums and trees to be able to have children is a practice that originates from Shamanism. For instance; the tree belief that is sacred for Shamanist Altays has continued with the trees in mausoleums after Muslimism. Holy trees of Shamanism, tombs of ancestors and great shamans have turned in Islamic colours and changed into mausoleums of saints where people believe to have children if they pray or have contact with any object (Karaaslan, 2011, s. 1437).

Women who cannot have children go to Malik Ejder mausoleum in Kahramanmaras and visit there successively for 7 years after having children. Women without children apply three different practices in Amasya. Some make wishes by spring waters, under sacred trees or mausoleums. Women who desire to have children are sold to these places. The name Satilmis (literally meaning 'sold') is given to the children of those women who have children by these means. Sometimes the future mothers who want to have baby leave children clothes to these mausoleums like places. They believe they will have children in this way. It is believed that those places would give them children or help them to have children (Artun, 2009, ss. 149, 150).

Furthermore, traditional methods known as folk medicine in many places are also applied to be able to have children. There are some traditional medicine and practices learned from experience in oral culture environment. The most common method is sitting the women who cannot have children above water steam. It is aimed to open uterus and also treat inflammation by the steam made with several substances and herbs that have heating, burning, anti-inflammatory or softening features. The most common of these are green vegetables, milk and chicken faeces (Bascetincelik, 2009; Teke, 2005). These chicken faeces here does not have a medical curative feature, however, it symbolises passing the ovulation feature of chickens to the women by contact and it can also be considered as the imitation of chickens' incubation. Another practice seems as cupping is for removal of lower back pain regarded as an obstacle for giving birth.

All these practices applied for having children are centred on women. The practices are generally for women, and there are no common beliefs or practices regarding the elimination of infertility on men. Considering women as the responsible for not having children is very common in Anatolia (Acipayamli, 1974; Cakirer & Caliskan, 2010; Teke, 2005; Tortumluoglu, Karahan, Bakir & Turk, 2005). In some areas, it is regarded as a sin or something embarrassing for men to go to the doctors.

2.2. Cultural beliefs and practices during pregnancy

When various studies from different parts of our county are analysed, cultural practices during pregnancy are found to be generally about the diet of pregnant women and gender of the children. Cultural practices related to diet occur as having some of the food abundantly and limitations on eating some other food. As for nutrition during pregnancy, food craving is a behaviour that originates from physiological changes in the earlier times of pregnancy, has had cultural importance in time and has become a subject of learning and practicing.

According to the research conducted by Erbil and Saglam'in (2010) in Gynaecology and Paediatric Illnesses Hospital, Gynaecology and Obstetrics Polyclinic, Ordu on 213 women; it is determined that 16.1% of women have traditional beliefs about guessing and determining the gender of baby and 34.0% of them have tried traditional practices to determine the gender of baby.

It is believed that the food that pregnant women eat affects the gender of their future babies, and if a pregnant woman wants to eat sour things, she will have a girl and if she wants to eat sweet things, she will have a boy. Accordingly, the riddle meaning 'Eat sweet give birth to a horseman, and eat sour give birth to an Ayse (a girl name in Turkish)' is said to the women very often in Havza, Samsun (Ozdemir, 2009). Differently, in Rize and Trabzon, it is believed that pregnant women crave for hot food when it's a girl, and sweet food when it's a boy (Balikci, 2010). As a different practice, wheat and barley are put in the urine of pregnant women in Amasya. It is believed that if it's a girl the wheat, and if it's a boy, the barley would turn green.

According to the study conducted by Celik, Capik and Engin (2012), it is observed that women eat to have beautiful or dimpled babies the most (14.4%) when they are pregnant. In these practices, 11.7% of women eat to have dimpled babies and 2.7% of them eat to have a beautiful baby.

- In the studies, it is believed that if the pregnant woman could not eat the food she craved, the woman would have disabled, squint-eyed children or the child would have a body mark on him/her, and if she ate, the child would be smart.
- It is believed that when pregnant women eat food that is believed to be harmful such as liver, strawberry, blackberry and rose leaf, babies would be in colours that are special to these foods.
- It is also believed that if the pregnant women eat an egg, the baby would be bald, and if she eats rabbit or camel meat, the lips of the baby would be split lips.
- It is a belief that it would affect the eye colour of the baby when green or black food is eaten (Cakirer & Caliskan, 2010; Isik, Akcinar & Kadioglu, 2010; Sahin, Ongan, Inanc, Baser & Mucuk, 2009; Yalcin, 2012).

There is no problem for the pregnant women in eating the desired food that they crave. However, it is important to not exaggerate. If they eat too much of only one food, it means that they probably don't eat enough of the other food that they should eat. And this may cause the pregnant women or the babies to have an insufficient amount of the nutrition required. Being rich in vitamin, minerals and protein of the food considered to be harmful shows that culture can be problematic at some point and nutrition training is required to be given to the pregnant women by the nurses (Yalcin, 2012).

Another important aspect of pregnancy is the gender of the baby. Except for the mother's and father's desire for a boy or girl, the pressure of their family, group, community or society may be felt more. When the value and supremacy of men in our traditional culture are considered, the common thinking of at least having the first child as a boy is easily understood (Example, 2000, s. 136). There are various practices applied within the framework of cultural beliefs in our country in order to guess the gender of the baby.

Some of them are as follows;

- Some salt is tossed to the pregnant woman, if she itches her head the baby is a girl, but if she itches her nose the baby is a boy.
- Without the knowledge of the pregnant woman, scissors and knife are placed on different sides under the mattress. If she sits near the scissors the baby is a girl, if she sits near the knife, the baby is a boy.
- Mother's milk is poured in a glass full of water, if the milk floats, it is a girl, or if the milk goes down to the bottom of the glass then it is a boy.
- Wedding ring of the pregnant woman is tied to a string, and hold above the wrist without any movement. If the ring moves circular, it is a girl; and if the ring moves horizontal it is a boy.
- If the future mother becomes uglier during pregnancy, the baby is a boy; if she becomes prettier, then the baby is a girl.

- If a pregnant woman's belly grows bigger it is a boy, if her hips get bigger, it is a girl.
- If the pregnant woman eats sweet, the baby would be a boy, if she eats sour, the baby would be a girl (Erbil & Saglam, 2010; Sahin et al., 2009).

Chicken gall is thrown into the fire to guess the baby's gender. If the gall goes off, it is a boy; if it is not, it is believed to be a girl. In Zile, when a woman is pregnant, her husband puts her hand on her belly and makes a special prayer three times, it is believed that the child will turn into a son even if it is a 6-month girl. In Duzici, Osmaniye, when a pregnant woman's midwife changes, her child's gender is believed to be changed too (Artun, 2012, ss. 161, 162).

A sacrifice is made to determine the gender of the baby among immigrants of Girit in Cukurova region. Gallbladder of the animal is thrown in the fire. The gender of the baby is identified according to the voice from the fire. According to the belief, if the voice of 'paf' comes from the fire, the baby is a boy, and if the voice 'puf' comes, the baby is a girl (Senesen, 2011, s. 73). In Gaziantep, the pregnant woman tears a piece of cloth from her underwear and leaves to an ant nest. If the ants take the piece to the nest, it is a boy; if not, it is a girl (Yuksel, 2007, s. 78).

The pregnant woman's convincing herself that she will have a baby with the gender she desires as a result of a traditional practice, or even conditioning herself to this, can be a psychological problem if it not happens, and can cause depression in the postpartum period. For this reason, the problem can be solved by collecting data in pregnancy follow-ups, making the required evaluation during the postpartum period and providing enough support (Erbil & Saglam, 2010).

2.3. Cultural beliefs and practices regarding end unintended pregnancies

In each society, as there are women who try to become pregnant and have children, there are also women who want to be protected from pregnancy and want to have a child when they want. Sometimes they don't want to get pregnant because of economic reasons, or sometimes it is social and psychological. If those women get pregnant, they don't want to give birth to the child and tries various things for it.

In our country, contraceptive methods applied in recent years for this purpose have been popular. However, traditional methods continue to be effective in preventing unintended pregnancies or terminating the pregnancy (Bascetincelik, 2009, s. 49).

Among the methods used by women who don't want to get pregnant in Adana, there are the methods of putting a chicken feather in the vagina and a brutal massage on groin made by the midwives in neighbourhoods (Bascetincelik, 2009, s. 50).

All of these practices are harmful to the women's health. The basic approach should be providing enough counselling, information and contraceptive methods to prevent unintended pregnancies with effective contraception methods, and raising awareness of women about avoiding these traditional practices. It should be emphasised to the women that abortion of children with traditional or medical methods is not a family planning policy, and the excessive demands should be met with family planning services (CS/US, 2005).

3. Conclusions and recommendations

Traditional practices related to the perinatal period continue to be sustained by societies, even though they show intercultural differences and change over time in the same cultures. Despite its potential beneficial effects, it should not be ignored that cultural practices during pregnancy may have harmful effects on both mother's and baby's health. The pregnant woman or her baby sometimes loses their lives as a result of cultural practices such as asking for prayers from a preacher, or incense.

Therefore;

- Discussion and evaluation of traditional beliefs and practices related to pre-pregnancy and pregnancy periods and supporting the beneficial ones.
- And allowing the use of practices that don't negatively affect health in line with medical treatments should be provided.
- The health care professionals should well know and evaluate the cultural factors of the society, the pregnant women and their families they give health care and plan their education accordingly.

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