Racism, sexism, and social class: implications for studies of health, disease, and well-being.

Racism, Sexism, and Social Class: Implications for Studies of Health, Disease, and Well-being

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One of the most persistent and pressing public health problems in the United States today remains among the most poorly understood: the excess rates of low birthweight (LBW) and infant mortality among children born to black women.1-3 Although both the incidence of LBW and the infant mortality rate in the United States have been declining for many decades, in any given year, black women are twice as likely as white women to experience the sorrow and loss of their babies’ deaths before they reach one year of age (Figure 1).4-10

To explain these trends, researchers have invoked two well-known facts. One—recorded since the advent of collecting vital statistics—is that infant mortality rates, in the aggregate, are higher among poor and less educated women.11-14 The second is that black women in the United States have persistently endured higher levels of poverty than white women.14,19 According to the 1990 census, 34% of black women and 11% of white women were living below the poverty line.20 The usual inference drawn from these facts is that the high rates of LBW and infant mortality among black women are attributable to their high rates of poverty.

Yet closer inspection of the data reveals an unusual and disturbing pattern among black women. Although their rates of LBW and infant mortality do rise as their levels of poverty and education decrease, the gradient is much less steep than that observed among white women (Tables 1 and 2).4 One consequence is that although rates of infant mortality and LBW are highest among both black and white poor and less educated women, the black:white ratio of infant mortality rates is lowest among women who have not completed high school (rate ratio = 1.7) and is highest among women with a college education (rate ratio = 2.0).1 Bluntly stated, black women have problematic birth outcomes regardless of their socioeconomic position.

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