

## Mothers' Experiences of Maternal Role Performance for Their Children with Cancer in Korea

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**Abstract.** This study was to explore and understand mother's experiences of maternal role performance for their children with cancer in the sociocultural context of Korea. Using ethnographic research method, informants consisted of 12 mothers caring for their children with cancer. The study has found a common cultural experience from the mothers expressed as "doing everything that I can". This cultural theme can be divided in 5 categories: 1) putting mother's personal life down, 2) doing my best for hospital treatment, 3) making all efforts for healing, 4) relying on supernatural agencies, and 5) struggling to sustain treatment. In conclusion, it was shown that mothers in Korea perform maternal role by mobilizing all the resources available in the course of caring for their children with cancer. This study suggests the development of nursing program that the mothers can perform positively their maternal role in Korean society.

**Keywords:** Maternal Role, Mother's Experience, Children with Cancer, Ethnography, Korean Society

### 1 Introduction

Mothers are responsible for a majority of the family health care and the child-rearing in Korean society in which family-oriented value is strong [1]. Especially, because the ideology that mothers must take care of their children with altruistic love, self-sacrifice and devotion remains alive and well, social expectation and demand for maternal role are still strong [2]. In the recent Korean society, parents give births to one or two children and do their damndest to rear the children. So, when their children have a life-threatening cancer, mothers have a severe guilty feeling for not properly performing their maternal role and give their best in caring for their children [3].

In order to provide a comprehensive nursing to mothers caring for children with cancer, it is necessary to understand and interpret in detail the experiences of the caregiver in a cultural context [4],[5]. There are a succinct number of qualitative studies that reflect the responsibilities and practical experiences of mothers who have children with cancer based on the understanding of the social environment surrounding them. Therefore, using ethnographic research method, this study aims to explore and understand in depth the mothers' experiences of maternal role

performance in caring for their children with cancer in Korean society which places with special significance to the maternal role, and finally provide basic data for developing effective nursing programs for mothers to properly perform their role.

## **2 Method**

### **2.1 Research Design**

This is a qualitative research, using ethnographic research method in order to explain and understand mothers' experiences of maternal role performance for their children with cancer in the sociocultural context of Korea.

### **2.2 Informants**

The informants were 12 mothers caring for their children who were then receiving treatment for cancer at a university hospital in Seoul.

### **2.3 Data Collection and Ethical Consideration**

The data were collected during the period of January 2013 to December 2013, using the field research method, such as informal interviews, participant observation, and telephone interviews. The main interview question was "what and how do you perform maternal role while caring for your child with cancer?" The interview was conducted at counseling room in the pediatric oncology nursing unit as well as at some quiet cafes. Participant observations were conducted during interviews of the informants. It is also observed environment aspects of informant's home and the shelter of children with cancer. The data collection was done up to the saturation point, when new materials could no longer be found.

For ethical reasons, the data collection began after the researcher informed the informants about the spontaneity of research, the guarantee of the confidentiality of the research contents and utilization of the data for research purpose only, and then, accepted agreement of the informants to participate in this research.

### **2.4 Data Analysis**

Data analysis was simultaneously performed as the data were being collected. Spradley's analysis method was used. To ensure the validity and credibility of the study, the results of the data analysis were submitted for verification to the informants,

two nurses having over 10 years working experience at the oncology nursing unit of the hospital where this research was conducted, two nursing professors with ethnographic research experience, and two professors, one from the Department of Korean Literature and another from the Department of Cultural Anthropology.

### **3 Results**

#### **3.1 General Characteristics of the Informants**

Among the total 12 mothers caring for their children with cancer, 6 were in their 30s and the remaining 6 were in their 40s. In terms of residential district, 10 mothers were from the provincial regions and the other 2 were from Seoul. As for their religious affiliation, 4 mothers were Christian, 2 were Buddhist, one was Catholic, and 5 had no religion. Regarding their occupation, 8 mothers indicated that they quit their jobs after their children were diagnosed with cancer, and the other 4 were full-time housewives.

#### **3.2 Experiences of Maternal Role Performance**

As a result, “doing everything that I can” was deduced as a cultural theme. This was categorized as 1) putting mother’s personal life down, 2) doing my best for hospital treatment, 3) making all efforts for healing, 4) relying on supernatural agencies, 5) struggling to sustain treatment.

1) Putting mother’s personal life down: this category includes, first, accepting the current situations as her fate as a result of committing three sins: the sin of being born as a woman; the sin of being married; and the sin of giving birth, second, taking caring responsibility alone, which derives from the social expectations for the maternal role and awareness of lack of the role performance, and, third, going to build a fence with others because of the daily life of being one in body and spirit with the child who is being isolated for treatment.

2) Doing my best for hospital treatment: this category includes, first, living away from home in search of doctors and hospitals to provide the best care to the child, second, tolerating dissatisfaction about the medical team and following them in the position of weakness, as I leave my child to the hospital, and, third, making every effort to prevent the side effects of the treatment.

3) Making all efforts for healing: this category includes, first, putting all her heart and soul into feeding the child well unconditionally, with the idea that well-feeding is the fundamental treatment, second, changing home furnishings, structure, environment and patterns of family life taking into account the needs of the sick child, and, third, pursuing various methods to facilitate recovery and improve immunity.

4) Relying on supernatural agencies: this category includes, first, leaning on superstitious acts such as fortune-teller, exorcism, moving house, changing name, moving the graves of the ancestor like “a drowning man who will catch a straw - out of desperation”, second, living daily with the taboo and praying fortune, and, third, finding a new religion and relying on it, and clinging to the existed religion.

5) Struggling to sustain treatment: this category includes, first, camouflaging social conditions such as divorce and property transfer, etc., which, ultimately, have a cost on the mother’s future life in order to continue the treatment, second, pocketing mother’s pride to save the medical expense and get support for the fees, and, third, changing into being a strong motherhood by abandoning womanhood for focusing on the treatment of the child only.

#### **4 Conclusion**

In conclusion, the study has found that the traditional value of maternal role is exerted strongly in the course of performing mothers’ caring role for their children with cancer in Korean society. “Doing everything that I can” is a cultural theme deduced through the mothers’ experiences of maternal role performance. This theme is unique to the caring culture of Korean mothers that perform maternal role volitionally and practically by mobilizing all the resources that they can access for the treatment and recovery of their children with cancer. This study has emphasized that an understanding of cultural values, faith, and diversity of the community should initially be taken into account in order to provide a comprehensive nursing to mothers caring for their children with cancer. This study suggests, based on the finding, that nursing intervention program must be developed to reflect and be applied to diverse cultural experiences of mothers of children with cancer so that they can positively perform their maternal role in Korean society, which has high expectation from, and put heavy burden, maternal role.

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