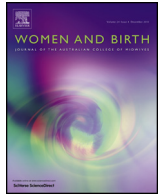




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Original Research – Qualitative

The private journey: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of exclusive breastfeeding

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ABSTRACT

Background: Exclusive breast milk provides complete nutrition for a baby's first six months of life. In Australia, breastfeeding initiation rates are high, however duration rates are low. Although numerous studies have explored the reasons behind low levels of breastfeeding, few have examined the experiences of women who maintain exclusive breastfeeding for the recommended six-month duration.

Aim: This paper will present an in-depth, idiographic interpretation of first-time mothers' experience of exclusive breastfeeding for six months in Australia.

Method: Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to explore how five new mothers understood their six-month exclusive breastfeeding journey. Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted retrospectively, transcribed in full, and analysed using the flexible seven-step approach of interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Findings: Three higher-order themes were identified: (1) exclusive breastfeeding is a personal choice, (2) exclusive breastfeeding is harder than expected, and (3) everyone has something to say about breastfeeding.

Conclusion: The mothers were not prepared for public debates around infant feeding methods, where mothers judge each other and give advice that supports their own goals, both of which create an unnecessary divide between mothers. Despite these issues, the findings highlight the personal and social meanings aligned with exclusive breastfeeding and point to the significance in fostering determination as a means to achieve exclusive breastfeeding goals. This qualitative reflection contributes a nuanced understanding of mothers' lived experience of exclusive breastfeeding, deepening our understanding and enabling appropriate strategies and support for the longevity of exclusive breastfeeding, as well as direction for continued research.

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Statement of significance

Problem or issue

Australian breastfeeding initiation rates are high, however exclusive breastfeeding duration rates are low.

What is already known

Breastfeeding difficulties are known as the primary reason why women discontinue exclusive breastfeeding in the early postnatal period.

What this paper adds

The experiences of women who not only intended to exclusively breastfeed but also achieved this goal, were explored in this study. Adding the perspective of mothers who maintained exclusive breastfeeding for six months contributes personal and social meanings of breastfeeding, and knowledge on how to promote, increase and support the longevity of exclusive breastfeeding into the future.

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1. Background

The World Health Organization (WHO)¹ recommends that women exclusively breastfeed for six months. This means to give a baby breast milk only, with the exception of oral rehydration solution, vitamins, minerals or medicines.¹ Despite significant research revealing increased health benefits when exclusive breastfeeding is maintained for six months,^{2,3} Australian women fall well short of this target. Current statistics report that although 92.3% of Australian women exclusively breastfeed at birth, only 17.6% continue to do so at six months.⁴

Previous research around the longevity of breastfeeding has focused on identifying factors that hinder the continuation of exclusive breastfeeding in the early postnatal period.^{5,6} Reasons for cessation in the birth to two-month period generally include difficulties with breastfeeding rather than maternal choice. The time frame between two and six months, however, has been identified as the largest decline in Australian exclusive breastfeeding rates,⁴ yet interventions and research during this period are limited. Understanding the experiences of women who not only intended to exclusively breastfeed for six months but also achieved this goal is essential in moving towards an understanding regarding the personal and social meanings of breastfeeding.⁷ It also contributes a greater understanding on how to promote, increase and support the longevity of exclusive breastfeeding into Australia's future.

The aim of this qualitative study therefore, is to describe and interpret the experiences of first-time Australian mothers, in their journey of exclusive breastfeeding for six months. By focusing on the specific experience of exclusive breastfeeding to six months,^{8,9} in a culture where statistically it is not the norm, this study provides a detailed, idiographic analysis of how the participants

made sense of their exclusive breastfeeding journey as well as what enabled them to reach their breastfeeding goals.

2. Methods

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)¹⁰ was used to gain an in-depth qualitative understanding on the experience of exclusive breastfeeding for first-time Australian mothers. IPA's epistemological roots are in phenomenology and hermeneutics, and the method is ideographic where each case is examined in great detail as an entity in its own right before a move to more general claims.¹⁰ IPA seeks to understand the 'lived' experience of participants and the focus is on making sense of peoples' ways of thinking, their motivations and actions.^{10,11} In IPA, sample sizes are small and homogenous, which limit the generalisability of the findings, however a richer in-depth analysis is gained that might be inhibited with a larger sample.¹⁰ By offering detailed accounts of individual experience, IPA research aims at depth rather than breadth, for a very particular group.¹⁰

2.1. Participants

Five participants were purposively sampled to gather a homogenous sample of women.^{9,12} By making the sample as uniform as possible (Fig. 1) psychological variability within the group can be examined through analysing the pattern of convergence and divergence between the women.¹⁰ The women responded to a community-advertising flyer asking for first-time mothers to volunteer in a study regarding their breastfeeding experiences. The respondents were all married and of a Caucasian background. The participants were recruited two weeks before the time of the interview. All participants exclusively breastfed for at

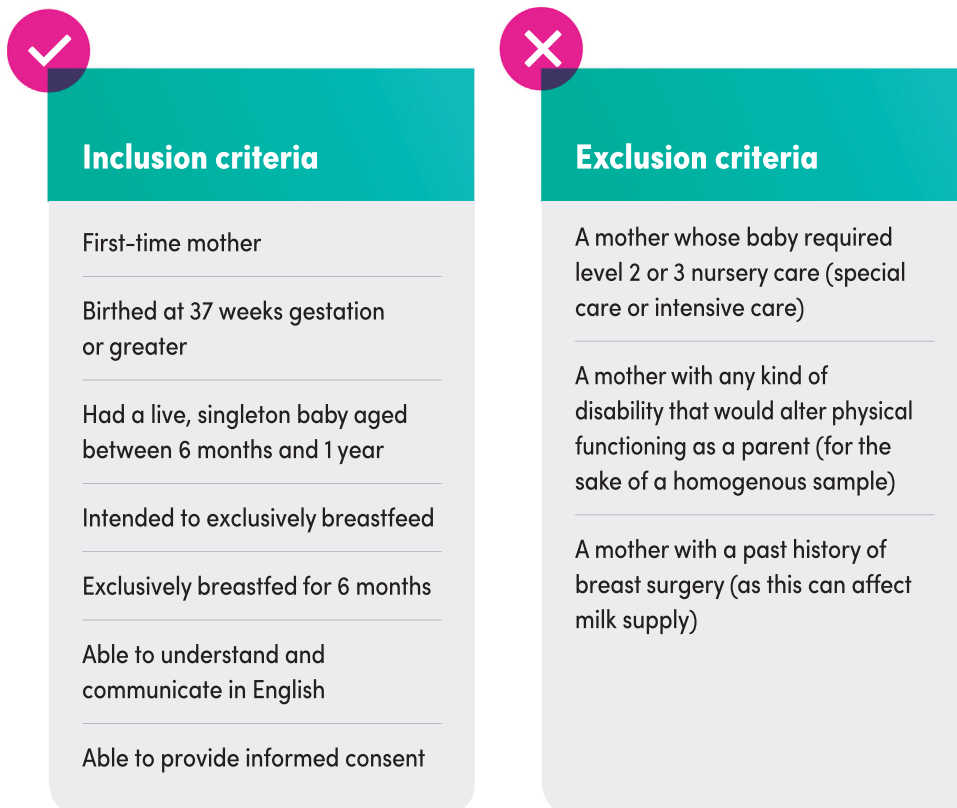


Fig. 1. Participant inclusion and exclusion criteria.

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