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Practitioners' perceptions and experiences of the baby mat mental healthcare intervention

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Abstract

This study set out to explore the perceptions of practitioners who deliver the Baby Mat intervention, a community-based parent-infant mental healthcare intervention offered at primary healthcare clinics in Alexandra Township, Johannesburg. Mental healthcare support is currently lacking in primary healthcare clinics in South Africa, making community-based interventions, such as this, a necessity. The Baby Mat intervention aims to foster secure attachments between mothers/caregivers and infants, shaping a healthy foundation for future holistic well-being. Data for this study were collected using qualitative techniques of two focus group discussions and three individual interviews. The sample size of purposively selected participants comprised the 12 Baby Mat practitioners who currently deliver the intervention. The results of the data were analysed by means of thematic analysis. The findings of the study reflected the practitioners' lived experiences of delivering the Baby Mat service. The practitioners' perceptions highlighted that their demonstrated skills of reflective functioning encourage the caregivers to acknowledge the emotional and psychological state of their infants, which promotes caregiver-infant attachment. The supportive role and disposition of the Baby Mat practitioners were suggested as essential characteristics that mirror caregivers' experiences of *umdlezane*. This is an Nguni term that refers to the post-partum period when the caregiver-infant relationship is prioritised by the support of other women in the family or community. The culturally diverse co-facilitating practitioners were understood to support the therapeutic alliance, and accordingly enrich the applicability of the Baby Mat intervention within the targeted community context. Given the critical need for relevant and accessible mental healthcare services in communities such as Alexandra Township, the findings from the study convey how this community-based intervention may be effective in other comparable contexts.

Keywords: Baby Mat intervention, parent-infant psychotherapy, caregiver-infant dyad, attachment, reflective functioning, therapeutic alliance, community-based prevention and intervention, co-facilitation