



**The Experience of the Parent in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit  
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The College Alumni Society Research Grant allowed me to begin my ethnographic research for my senior thesis. Throughout the summer, I facilitated parent support groups for mothers and fathers in the Children's Hospital of Pennsylvania's Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). The NICU can be a very stressful and overwhelming place for parents as they are sometimes unable to touch or hold their babies because of wires and incubators. The inability to have a traditional parent experience as well as the stress and emotions that come along with making decisions for critically ill babies takes a toll on parents who spend days and sometimes months in the NICU. Parent support groups were designed to help parents cope with these emotions and collaboratively support one another.

As a facilitator, I helped psychiatrists and social workers run parent support groups such as knitting, scrap-booking, and adult coloring. During these groups I observed parents behaviors taking detailed field notes. My time spent with parents in the NICU, made possible by the College Alumni Society Research Grant, gave me valuable insight into how parents are internalizing and processing their experiences in the NICU. Several themes arose from my observations. For example, many parents expressed guilt or responsibility for their infant's situation, being overwhelmed by the environment in the NICU, and a general sense of longing for a more traditional parenting situation. I was able to observe a wide variety of parents of different ages and from several socioeconomic, geographical, and ethnic backgrounds.

The next step of my research is to interview parents who had a child in the NICU and ask them to reflect retrospectively on their experience. My observations helped me form more concrete research questions and aided me in writing an interview guide. I will be asking questions such as what was your relationship like with NICU medical personnel? How did your relationship with your partner change and develop? How did you cope while you were in the NICU?

Before this project, I had never conducted my own primary research. With my advisor and supervisors at CHOP, I learned how to take helpful and detailed field notes. Once my interviews

are conducted, I plan to analyze and code them for themes and patterns. Both the analyzed interviews and observations will be the bulk of my paper, which I plan to write in the coming months.