

# The self-as-mother in the preschool years: an interpretive phenomenological analysis

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## Article

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## Abstract

There has been little research into the well-being of mothers after 12 months post-partum, despite researchers finding that depressive symptoms are more prevalent at 4 years post-partum than at any other time preceding this. The literature suggests that a woman's view of the mother role impacts on her well-being in the early years of parenting. This qualitative research study investigated the experiences of mothers of preschool-aged children in Melbourne, Australia, and how they incorporated the role of mother into their self. Eight semi-structured interviews were completed, and interpretive phenomenological analysis was used to explore the data. The data revealed four subthemes relating to the emergence of the maternal self: becoming a mother as a journey of self-discovery, the biological imperatives of becoming a mother, remothering and the continued challenges of the emerging mother role. Although the experiences of mothering are as diverse as women themselves, even in the mostly homogenous sample, as in this study, several themes were present that both support and diverge from the existing literature.

## Introduction

The idea that motherhood is natural and analogous with femininity itself has been widely critiqued over the years (Kristeva, 1985). Feminists argue that motherhood is socially, politically and culturally reconstructed and that there is no universal experience of motherhood (Crittenden, 2001; Rich, 1976). Rich differentiates motherhood; the patriarchal and oppressive institution from mothering; the theoretically empowering agency of mothers (O'Reilly, 2006; Rich, 1976).

Motherhood is idealised and deified (Douglas, 2004; Hays, 1996; Rubin, 1984), but it is also unappreciated and considered less valuable than economic activities (Crittenden, 2001). The current dominant ideology of motherhood in Western countries such as Australia is *Intensive Mothering*. Hays (1996) defines Intensive Mothering as a child-centred approach, relying heavily on expert advice and prohibitively large amounts of a mother's time, energy and finances to attend to all of the child's emotional, physical and intellectual needs. Whether mothers subscribe to the ideology of Intensive Mothering or not, these are still the standards by which they are judged (Hays, 1996).

Under this dominant ideology, stay-at-home mothers who primarily focus on their children are still considered the gold standard of a 'good mother' (Arendell, 2000) despite more women than ever working outside the home (Gorman & Fritzsche, 2002). Douglas (2004) argues that these manufactured 'Mummy Wars' serve to distract mothers from the real issues they face: inadequate childcare options, anti-mother workplace policies and neoliberal public policy. Johnston (2004) found significant internalisation of the 'Mummy Wars', particularly for stay-at-home mothers. Mothers, whether working outside the home or not, are now spending significantly more time with their children than they were 40 years ago (Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2006), perhaps to meet the unrealistic demands of Intensive Mothering.

The research on the transition to becoming a mother reveals that women experience many losses: personal time, space, sense of self, confidence and self-esteem can all significantly impact on quality of life (Barclay & Lloyd, 1996; Nelson, 2003; Rubin, 1984; Seefat-van Teeffelen, Nieuwenhuijze, & Korstjens, 2011). Laney, Hall, Anderson, and Willingham (2015) identified that along with the self-loss that women experience comes a redefinition of the self as a mother. The incorporation of the mother role into the mother's self was impacted by the level of freedom from, or fusion with, her child.

There has been little research into the psychosocial experience of mothers after 12 months post-partum, despite one in three women reporting depressive symptoms in the first 4 years after birth (Woolhouse, Gartland, Mensah, & Brown, 2014). Scant literature explores how mothers may be supported to function well purely because they deserve to enjoy increased well-being in and of themselves (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015). Holloway, Suzuki, Yamamoto, and Mindnich (2006) found that feeling effective as a parent and being employed predicted greater well-being. Mothers with poor mental well-being see their maternal role as unsatisfying and demanding (Harvey, & Thaker, 2012) and their children's development is negatively impacted even in

adolescence (Giallo, Cooklin, Wade, D'Esposito, & Nicholson, 2014). Improved well-being benefits both mothers and their children and families (Dillon-Wallace, McDonagh, & Fordham, 2014). Indeed, a mother's life satisfaction has a more substantial influence on child outcomes than parent employment, education and hours in childcare (Berger & Spiess, 2010). These findings indicate that even in a culture with a dominant motherhood ideology such as ours, well-being is related to individual judgements about the mother role.

### *The self-concept*

How a person views herself, or her self-concept, effects one's cognitive, behavioural and emotional responses to the world. Sedikides and Brewer (2001) structure the self-concept using a tripartite model containing the individual self, the relational self and the collective self. The individual self is how we differ from others and is based on comparison, the relational self represents how we incorporate significant others into our self-definition and the collective self indicates one's inclusion in social in-groups and comparison with out-groups. Individuals move between these levels of the self depending on context and situation.

A recent review of the literature on relational self-concept, well-being and gender (Wills & Petrakis, 2018) found that women are more likely to have a relational self-construal than men. There is some indication that the intrapsychic changes that occur when a woman becomes a mother lead to a more relational self-concept. Scholars have long grappled with this idea. Chodorow (1999) views a woman's independence as more fluid and situationally dependent than a man's. Ruddick (1989) further argues that mothers think differently to men and non-mothers. According to Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, the values, judgements, attitudes and cognitive capabilities of a mother govern the relational practices of mothering.

Similarly, Miller (2005) believes that mothers develop a new self, self-as-mother, into their self-concept. Conversely, Rich (1976) argues that a woman's view of her self-as-mother is only one self during the lifespan and not a permanent identity. Indeed, Lee, Chung, Park, and Burns (2016) argue that the importance of the relational elements of the maternal self-concept increased with the child's age and independence and a decrease in the parenting role. Laney et al. (2015) similarly found that mothers' identities somewhat reverted to pre-child self after the infancy stage. Lee, Chung, Park, and Burns (2016) and Wills and Petrakis (2018) both note that there is a distinct lack of contemporary literature exploring maternal self-concept across the lifespan.

Given the dearth of recent studies on maternal self-concept after the transition to motherhood, this study seeks to explore the lived experience of mothers of preschool-aged children (ages 3–5) in Melbourne, Australia, and their adoption of the maternal role in the early years of parenting. An appreciation of mothers' experiences of self-as-mother will provide direction for future, mother-centred, support programmes and research. As O'Reilly (2006) notes, a legitimisation of the diversity of motherhood is developing, which is potentially empowering for mothers. The image of the 'good mother' is ubiquitous in public policy, workplaces, schools and everyday life (Goodwin & Huppertz, 2010). A better understanding of the world that a range of mothers inhabit will promote more accurate and attainable expectations for all mothers and see women recognised as good mothers more often (Medina & Magnuson, 2009).

### **Methods**

This study is both exploratory and descriptive as it sought to gain a comprehensive representation of the mothers' lived experience (Jackson, 2009). In order to gain a deeper understanding of women's experience of mothering, qualitative methods are most fitting. The Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee issued ethics approval for the study in November 2015.

#### *Participant recruitment*

Emails were sent to 404 preschools across Melbourne, Australia, with an invitation to participate in the study. Preschools placed posters in their foyers and letters in the children's cubby holes. Women interested in participating in the study emailed or called the researcher to schedule an appointment. Recruitment took place throughout the Australian academic year, from February to December 2016. All participants provided written consent to take part in the research. English-speaking mothers living in metropolitan Melbourne with a preschool-aged child were recruited. Participation in the study was voluntary, and thus the sample recruited was non-representative. The sample size of eight is consistent with accepted phenomenological ideals (Creswell, 1998; Morse, 2004; Smith & Osborn, 2003). Several factors contributed to the small response rate – a dearth of resources and time for preschool staff, a lack of time for mothers to participate and also the child-focused, rather than mother-focused, nature of preschools. For a detailed discussion of these challenges, see Hansen (2019).

#### *Procedure*

Respondents met with the researcher in their own home, workplace or a café and were also asked to fill in a brief written questionnaire containing demographic information (employment status, age, number and ages of children, ethnicity, level of education, household income and relationship status). Semi-structured interviews were conducted immediately following this. Interviews explored how women view their role as mothers, who or what supports them in this role and what challenges they encounter in mothering preschool-aged children. Interviewing is well suited to investigating phenomenon relating to the meaning of experiences (Darlington & Scott, 2002; Seidman, 2013; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). The semi-structured interview had five predetermined questions. The less structured the interview, the better able the researcher is to clarify meaning with the participant in the moment (Darlington & Scott, 2002). Interviewing is also in keeping with the feminist-informed approach of this research, prioritising women's voices (Cosgrove & McHugh, 2000).

#### *Analysis*

All interviews were transcribed and analysed using an interpretive approach. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), as described by Smith and Osborn (2003), was used. IPA, consistent with the hermeneutical phenomenological approach to the research, allows for descriptive coding which, while not necessarily leading to insight, allows for the researcher's judgement, observation and reflection to inform the analysis (Sharkey, 2001). IPA is essentially the researcher seeking to understand respondents' understandings of their lived experience (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

Data analysis began on a case-by-case basis through which each text was analysed in detail before moving on to other cases looking for more general themes. Each transcript was read multiple times with initial interpretations noted in the left margin. After several

**Table 1.** Participant demographics

Name	Age	No. of children	Age of oldest child	Age of youngest child	Country of birth	Employment status	Relationship status	Education
Siobhan	41	2	4	1	Australia	Part time	Married	Postgraduate
Olivia	32	2	5	1	Australia	Not looking	Married	Bachelor
Imogen	37	2	4	2	UK	Not looking	Married	Bachelor
Rebecca	38	2	3	1	Australia	Not looking	De-Facto	Postgraduate
Jennifer	42	2	9	3	Australia	Part time	Married	Grad dip
Dianne	36	3	7	5	UK	Part time	Married	Postgraduate
Veronica	39	1	4	4	UK	Part-time	Married	Grad dip
Tanya	42	3	10	4	UK	Part time	Married	Postgraduate

readings, emergent themes were identified and noted in the right margin. Themes were then grouped into clusters with those themes that were not rich in description discarded. A table of themes was developed in this manner for each respondent. These tables were then compared for divergence and convergence, and a list of superordinate themes for the sample was determined. For this article, the themes have been converted to a narrative which enables them to be explained and illustrated.

## Findings

### Respondent demographics

Recruitment efforts yielded eight respondents with a mean age of 38.4 years and an average of 2.1 children (Table 1; pseudonyms have been used). All respondents were in cohabitating relationships with seven married and one de-facto. All respondents had completed tertiary studies, four at post-graduate level and 37% were full-time carers with the remainder employed part-time. The high level of educational attainment is notable in this sample. There were no full-time employed mothers in the study. Fifty percent of the respondents were Australian-born, and 50% were born in the United Kingdom. Two respondents were from the same site, no other respondents were known to each other.

### The emergence of a maternal identity: from transformation to transmutation

For all but one of the participants, the transition to becoming a mother was still salient even several years later. The women describe that a tremendous amount of intrapsychic work took place to reconcile their new role as mother and create a new schema of self-as-mother. For many, this was characterised as a pragmatic transformation of many of the parts of their pre-child selves over the course of several years leading to a profound transmutation of the self, whereby the role of mother subsumed all others.

*I view myself quite a lot as a mother rather than necessarily as an individual. I'm not sure if that's a good thing or not, but yeah, I do definitely see myself very strongly as being a mother and that's my definite first priority in my life, certainly now. [Tanya]*

*I suppose I am trying to remember myself before I became a mother, which is very difficult to remember because now, my identity as a mother has become my identity, it's hard to remember what my previous identity was. [Jennifer]*

The data revealed four subthemes relating to the emergence of the maternal self: becoming a mother as a journey of self-discovery, the biological imperatives of becoming a mother, remothering and the continued challenges of the emerging mother role.

### Becoming a mother as a journey

For some mothers, the emergence of their maternal identity was experienced as particularly challenging.

*I remember feeling like I'd fallen down a hole and just kind of vanished. Yeah, like all the things I'd previously done in my life, it was sort of reduced to feeding, nappy change, trying to settle what was actually becoming quite a fractious child. [Dianne]*

Three respondents used the term 'rollercoaster' when referring to their experiences of mothering and becoming a mother was experienced as a 'journey'. For Olivia, this was conceptualised as a painful but necessary journey of self-discovery.

*Yeah, it's been a journey. It's been a big one, but one that I've also been grateful for because I've learned a lot along the way about myself. It just kind of fast-tracks so many lessons in life. [Olivia]*

The incorporation of the role of mother into their self-schema came later for two mothers, after some struggle. For Olivia, the birth of her second child cemented her new identity as mother, but for Jennifer, it was the breakdown of her relationship with her daughter's father that prompted the integration of her role as mother into her self-concept.

*I think I probably still very much, not consciously, certainly not consciously, but probably my subconscious had it as two separate things. I'm Jennifer, and I am this person, and this is what I like to do, and then there's that, and then I think once things went bad in the relationship and I had to make a choice, I think those bits became integrated. I went, no, they're not separate. Grow up. This is what you are. [Jennifer]*

Despite preparing for becoming mothers, several respondents felt that they were not adequately equipped for the demands that would be made of them, personally, as new mothers and the priority their child would take in their lives and what this meant for their identities.

*I think it would have been useful, and I think I speak for a lot of people who've had similar experiences with, if they spent a lot less time stating the importance of having a drug free labour and birth, and talked a lot more about the fundamental changes that will happen in your life and your relationship postpartum. Just stuff like any notions that you had of yourself as an autonomous individual, just chuck them out the window now. It's just not compatible. [Dianne]*

### The biological imperatives of becoming a mother

Several respondents distinguished between their biological and emotional experiences of becoming a mother. Jennifer felt a biological urge to become a mother but not a psychological urge. Imogen experienced concern over her pregnancy and her lack of 'maternal instinct'.

*I have to confess that when I was fresh pregnant, I actually did worry a lot about my lack of maternal instinct, but I just seem to have settled into it really nicely. [Imogen]*

Imogen's experience of mothering led to a re-evaluation of the role of a mother and what maternal instinct means to her. Imogen held a firm view of her role in her children's lives and, like many of the respondents, drew great pride in her ability to raise her children and fulfil the biological imperative.

*... my job as a mother is about preparing them for their lives, for when their lives are independent of me and making sure that they have the skills and the aptitude. I think I have maternal instinct. [Imogen]*

Several mothers expressed that they expected that mothering would feel more natural than it did and felt a sense of failure for not being 'natural' mothers.

*I just found myself in a place where I didn't really know myself. I didn't know myself anymore and it didn't come naturally. [Olivia]*

Only one of the women identified her age at the birth of her first child as impacting on her experience of mothering. Siobhan felt different from her same age friends who had given birth earlier than her. She also attributed her fatigue and lack of energy to her age. Siobhan also had some physical barriers to mothering due to an old back injury. Both of these factors impacted on her perceived ability to cope with parenting small children.

All but one participant planned their first pregnancy. For Olivia, who did not plan her pregnancy, there was incongruence between her physical and emotional readiness to become a mother.

*Yeah, my biological clock hadn't quite got there yet, so it was a bit of a surprise. I was in a place where I just started my Masters, and I had a firm direction in my life. Yeah, I wasn't quite ready, I guess. That was the biggest thing for me. In terms of the physical side of everything – pregnancy, birth, me breastfeeding – that was all good. Yeah, I think adjusting to the identity crisis of becoming a mum was difficult. [Olivia]*

### Remothering

The act of mothering gave mothers pause to reflect on their upbringing and the decisions their parents, particularly their mothers, made. Some sought to replicate their upbringing while others rejected it.

*We looked at how we were parented and questioned that. I thought that, out of anything, even if we didn't have a label for it or didn't know what we were doing, at least, we said, at least if we look at how we were parented and decided what we liked and what we didn't like and how we think that affected us as a grown up and do things differently. [Veronica]*

Mothering their own children was experienced as a remothering for some of the women, where the practices of mothering healed old wounds and established themselves as a different kind of mother to their own.

*I think for me, having kids has helped me work through a lot of feelings of unworthiness and inadequacy that I picked up from my birth family. So, in that way, I think it's been quite a healing experience. [Dianne]*

Some of the women looked to their mothers as role models for their style of mothering. Imogen, Jennifer and Olivia all openly

acknowledged the influence their mother's style of parenting had on them, whether they asked for advice or not.

*The funny thing is I don't think I ever directly asked my mum for much advice and stuff. I just remember thinking, what would she have done? What was my experience of childhood? How do I replicate that? That was how I went really. [Jennifer]*

### Continued challenges of the role of mother

Becoming a mother had been difficult for all respondents but two expressed continued difficulties in the preschool years. Unlike most other respondents, both of these mothers had a toddler in addition to a pre-schooler. Rebecca is a stay-at-home mother, and Siobhan works outside the home. Both of their struggles related to their work status.

*I used to think I was a very strong woman, but it's broken me down a bit. I used to feel like I was a strong woman, and I can do all of these things, and accomplish all of this stuff, and now it's like, okay let's see if I can get my house clean today, or you just don't know. [Rebecca]*

*I am very proud of them and if I try to focus on that and what I have done with them then I am okay. But, if I think about the whole, then I think well I am not actually doing as well as I was before, I am getting worse about that. [Siobhan]*

In the early years of mothering, lack of sleep was a significant challenge for several of the respondents and impacted profoundly on their well-being. Rebecca thought she may have postnatal depression (PND) and had attended her primary care practitioner.

*But the big question that the doctor asked was if, would I still be feeling the same way if I wasn't tired (laughs) and I said 'no?' Yeah. I suppose the big question was whether or not I was suffering from postnatal depression, and that was the question they asked. And because I thought that if I was getting sleep that I wouldn't feel this way. So the plan was to move forward and work on sleep training. [Rebecca]*

Sleep issues can be considered a 'normal' part of raising children. Despite four respondents citing sleep problems, only one attended a sleep school, which was a positive experience.

*They were amazing. I turned up there kind of a wreck and left three days later having not cooked or done any laundry for three days, and with a child that slept a lot better. I mean she was tough. There's nothing as great as going to a sleep school and having the nurses say, 'Yeah, that's a tough one.' Yes. Finally. It's not just me. The sleep school was great, but I think they're really under-resourced. I know so many people who've benefited from them. Yet to get a spot is really difficult. I got in on a cancellation. Then the second time around I would have jumped the queue with twins, but we could only afford to go to a day one because there was nowhere to put the other child. [Dianne]*

Finding time for themselves was a challenge for all mothers in the study. Mothers expressed a desire to do things they enjoy or nothing on their own. Negotiation with partners for this time was often cited.

*Keeping a sense of yourself and keeping a sense of doing good things for yourself, is very easy for that to fall to the bottom of the list. [Veronica]*

Respondents expressed a need to engage in self-care despite the difficulties in finding time to do so. Mothers needed to be creative to find time and space for self-care – exercise, gardening and journaling were all cited as self-care activities.

*I find on a sunny day, which we're getting a few more of, while she's asleep, if my son and I can get out in the garden, I find that that's really therapeutic for me, so that's all ... even though I'm still with him, I'm into my passions. It still gives me a brain clear. [Rebecca]*



For Siobhan, she felt mainly judged at work. While employed part-time, her performance was rated against full-time measurements of productivity. Also, she was the only mother in her department and felt little understanding from her male and childless colleagues about the additional work she did at home.

*I work Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, so when I go on Tuesday, he'll say, 'Oh, enjoy your day off tomorrow' I'm like, it's my day on actually. [Siobhan]*

## Discussion

Although the experiences of mothering are as diverse as women themselves, even in the mostly homogenous sample of this study, several themes were present that both support and diverge from the existing literature.

The emergence of the maternal self was experienced differently for all eight women. Most of the women, when speaking of their experience of mothering, reflected on the early days of becoming a mother. Most adjusted to their new role as mother quickly, but not easily. All women were proud of their role as mothers and felt their identity as a mother had subsumed all other identities. This is consistent with Miller's (2005) view of the self-as-mother. The characterisation of this role attainment as a journey is potentially consistent with Rich's (1976) view as the role of mother as being one possible self across the lifespan.

All mothers referred to the biological and 'natural' qualities of the mother role, which reflects Kristeva's (1985) assertion that motherhood is seen, by Western patriarchal society, as something women are born to do. This biological perspective caused women to doubt their suitability for motherhood and impacted negatively on their parenting efficacy during the early days of parenting. Upon reflection, and having achieved some mastering in mothering, the biological perspective enabled women to feel proud of raising their children, possibly a response to being capable of delivering the omnipresent biological imperative.

An interesting finding is the notion that mothers found the process of mothering their children to be healing of their upbringings. This is consistent with the findings of Sheeran, Jones, and Welch (2015) who found that a new mother's relationship with her own mother was key during the early parenting stage. This warrants further study and has potential practice implications.

The continued challenges of lack of time to themselves and lack of sleep for mothers of preschool children, particularly those with younger children, extend on the loss experienced during the transition to motherhood (Barclay & Lloyd, 1996; Nelson, 2003; Rubin, 1984; Seefat-van Teeffelen et al., 2011). The difficulty in accessing sleep schools is an area that should be addressed given the significant impact lack of sleep had on the well-being of several respondents.

## Limitations

There are some limitations to the study that need to be taken into account before attributing these results to the broader population. This study has given voice to the experiences of a small sample of mothers who voluntarily participated in the study, and, as such, the themes identified in this study cannot be conclusively generalised to all mothers of preschool-aged children.

## Conclusion

This study of the experiences of self-as-mother has provided a greater understanding of how mothers attain, maintain and

support their self-definition during the early years of mothering. It has explored, in-depth, how mothers made sense of their new role and incorporated their new role into their existing self. Also, the emergence of a framework for the maternal self, drawing on and extending the tripartite model of the self is something that should be explored more extensively using greater sample numbers. This exploratory and descriptive study has privileged the voices of mothers and provided insight into the private worlds of mothers. These insights will be valuable in future mother-centred research and programme design.

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