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# BECOMING MUM:

## IDENTITY AND THE TRANSITION INTO MOTHERHOOD

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# Identity and the Transition into Motherhood



Transitioning into motherhood is a major life course event for women, and is one that can be difficult due to the uncertainty and instability which accompanies it.

Identity is known to play a key role in the transition, yet approaches to understanding its role tend to be static and fixed.

This research views takes an innovative approach, viewing identity as a fluid entity which continually changes over time and place.



# The Mother as an Assemblage

This approach sees identity as being made up of a number of components or parts which together form the overall identity of the individual .

The mothering identity is therefore only one aspect or dimension of the self and the transition into motherhood then involves the incorporation of this new identity into a woman's overall sense of identity.

Different events and changes prompt periods of instability which are followed by a change in identity. Once the individual becomes comfortable with their new role and the situated practices of it, their identity will stabilise.

# Who Am I?

## Narrating Their Own Stories

### Why Narrative Interviews?

This gave the mothers the opportunity to tell their own stories of their experiences of the transition into motherhood in their own words. No interruptions and no questions.

Using narrative interviews allowed the research to gather an indepth understanding of how these experiences underpinned the emergence of the mothering identity.

# *Four Key Themes*

## **Emotional Turmoil**

Highlighted the impact on the women of experiencing conflicting emotions simultaneously.

## **Reconstructing Relationships**

Explored the extensive changes which took place in the relationships the mothers held with their partners, family and friends.

## **Getting comfortable with baby**

Showed the importance of the women adapting to and becoming comfortable with their role as a mother for stabilising their identity.

## **Rediscovering the self**

Highlighted how the women rediscovered their self once they were comfortable in their role as a mother and changed their lives to accommodate motherhood.

The women all described experiencing a cycling of often conflicting emotions throughout their pregnancy and following childbirth.

Key points of turmoil tended to be the discovery of their pregnancy, the run up to childbirth and the immediate time period following.

Each of these points presented conflicting emotions such as shock, joy, excitement and fear.

Facing the unknown destabilised the women's identities as they struggled to adapt and process the ongoing changes in their everyday lives.

# The Emotional Turmoil of Motherhood



*So I had bought a pregnancy test. It was just me, my friend and my boyfriend. Neither of them knew I was doing the test. It was totally positive. I ran out and sat in the car and just cried and cried. I hadn't expected it to actually be positive. It was a total shock to the system.*

Kate, 19

*One day I just had a feeling, so when I woke up I took a test and it was positive. I was shocked. So shocked that I had to ask my partner if it was actually positive. I was excited but had to go to work. By the time I got there, even though I was still really excited the panic had set in because all I could think about was what happened last time. I was so scared thinking about what I would have to go through if I lost the baby.*

Joanne, 25



# A world of guilt...

Many of the women described feelings of guilt. For some this was because they struggled to meet their own expectations of motherhood.

Some of the women, such as Joanne, struggled with mothering practices such as breastfeeding and others struggled with the guilt of wanting time for themselves.



*I just wanted to stop feeling guilty. All I did was feel guilty all the time. I thought everyone just thought I was lazy and I honestly felt pressure to [breastfeed] by the midwives I had seen. I feel like I just couldn't bond with her because everyone else was looking after her for me. I think I sort of lost myself at that point to be honest. I was so tired all the time and I was just consumed with guilt.*

Joanne, 25



# Reconstructing Relationships

All of the women who took part in the study reported changes in their relationships with their partner, friends and family.

Several of the women experienced **relationship breakdown** and attributed this to the **differential adaption** of their partners to parenthood.

The women described how they drifted from many of their friends, however became much closer to their own mothers,



*My partner wasn't a hands on Dad. I did the night feeds, the nappy changes etc. He was just there. The relationship between us changed because we had someone to look after but I was the only one actually looking after him. It was my life that changed. I couldn't just go out with my friends when I wanted to, but he still did. A lot.*

Louise, 27

*I could relate to her experiences because I was now a Mam as well which really helped us improve our relationship. I wouldn't say we were equals. I look up to her so much because she was bringing us up on her own and I've got so much respect for that.*

Charlotte, 29

# Getting Comfortable With Baby

Many of the women initially felt profound self doubt in their mothering abilities.

Over time their confidence grew as they saw for themselves that they were capable of caring for their babies.

As they became more comfortable caring for their babies, they became more comfortable with their role as a mother which helped to stabilise their identities.



*I don't think I did it on my own for quite a while because I was just so frightened I was going to break it... I mean break him! [...] Once he settled more and was less colicky though it got so much easier. I just knew what to do and it started being what I had expected it to be.*

Charlotte, 29

## The Comfort of Routine

All of the women described how they became more comfortable with caring for their baby as time passed and they became more comfortable with engaging in mothering practices.

As they settled into their role as a mother their identity was able to stabilise and incorporate this new dimension of the self.


# *Rediscovering the Self*

All of the women described a sense of loss as they transitioned into motherhood.

They described how those around them consistently reduced them down to only their role as a mother, with this reduction contributing to this sense of loss,

It was not until they adjusted to their new role as a mother that they were able to begin to establish a balance between being a mother and being her own individual person.





*I feel like since I have had children I've lost who I am because now I am on the school run I am just known as Jake or Daniel's mam. You don't really have an identity anymore. If someone wants to speak to you, you're just referred to as so and so's mam.*

Claire, 21

*I just hadn't done anything for me since becoming a mam. Everything always revolved around the baby and doing things for him. When I actually started to go and do stuff for myself it felt amazing and really helped me find myself again as cliché as that sounds.*

Lucy, 31

# Conclusion



*maria ferrer photography*

Four key themes emerged from this research: emotional turmoil, reconstructing relationships, getting comfortable with baby and rediscovering the self.

Each of these themes linked to periods of identity change as the women negotiated points of instability on their journey to incorporate motherhood into their identity.

The research showed that the transition into motherhood is a complex and multifaceted process which requires extensive identity reformulation.