



The psychological effects of becoming “Mum”: An interpretative phenomenological analysis

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### ABSTRACT

The transition to the role of motherhood affects nearly all aspects of a woman’s life: her identity, priorities, responsibilities, as well as her interpersonal relationships and interactions with the external world. The aim of this qualitative study was to comprehend how women, who had previously led successful careers, interpreted and adjusted to their new maternal identities. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with five older mothers (mean age 40 years), with children under the age of 5, on their retrospective experiences of motherhood and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Five master themes emerged from the data including: “the renegotiation of marital roles”, “self-constructed motherhood”, “ghosts of own childhood”, “personal self – impact of initial transition”, and “personal self - striving for a new sense of identity”. Overall, the findings highlight the paradoxical effects of motherhood; from self-doubt and loss of autonomy, to overwhelming joy and a sense of achievement. The findings are compared to previous studies on the transition to motherhood and future research is suggested.

<b>KEY WORDS:</b>	<b>MOTHERHOOD</b>	<b>IDENTITY</b>	<b>IPA</b>	<b>SELF-CONCEPT</b>
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## INTRODUCTION

One of the pivotal turning points for any individual in adulthood is the transition to becoming a parent. As with any major transition this new direction requires a re-orientation and adaptation to substantial psychological and social changes in lifestyle. It signals a change of the family cycle, with essential alterations in the role requirements of both men and women. For women, these changes are also physiological, representing significant changes in weight, body shape, and image (Johnson, Burrows, & Williamson, 2004). Consequently, the new role of becoming 'Mum' can have major effects on the woman's self-concept (Katz-Wise, Priess, & Hyde, 2010) and self-efficacy (Smith, 1999a), as well as impacting on relationships with significant others (Ruble, Fleming, Hackel, & Stangor, 1988). This study draws on an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, 2003) of accounts from a small number of mothers. Consistent with IPA studies, there is no a priori hypothesis and as such, the following review of current and historic research is offered primarily to contextualise and provide a framework for the current study, as well as presenting a rationale for its aims.

Research to date has often focused on the negative, guided by medical and psychiatric models highlighting postpartum depression and insensitive parenting (Goldstein, Diener, & Mangelsdorf, 1996); in addition social scientists have emphasised marital conflict (Belsky, Youngblade, & Pensky, 1989) and depicted the arrival of the first child as a time of 'crisis' for both parents (LeMasters, 1957). To elaborate, a study by LeMasters (1957) involved interviewing 46 couples of whom 83 percent were reported as having experienced a period of "extensive" or "severe" crisis. Although a later study by Hobbs (1976) ameliorated this assertion somewhat and argued that parenthood constituted a time of transition rather than of crisis. Nevertheless, whether it is termed a crisis or a transitional process, pregnancy and the early stages of parenthood can initiate a period of disequilibrium and reorganisation for many individuals, exacerbated by the responsibility of new roles, circumstances, and demands (Glade, Bean, & Vira, 2005). In a review of the literature, Antonucci and Mikus (1988) cited major personal changes in areas such as self-perception, values, affective states, maturity, and self-efficacy.

The transition for mothers, in particular, is a period of major life change, both physically and psychologically, with many experiencing depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Belsky & Kelly, 1994). On the other hand, the challenges of motherhood can facilitate interpersonal development, psychological growth, and a profound sense of achievement; this paradox of extremes is extended by Rich (1976), "My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience. It is the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness" (p.21). Studies such as the one conducted by Belsky (1984) have suggested that how the transformation to motherhood evolves, that is positively or negatively, is contingent on the interaction of a complex array of influences involving individual, interpersonal, and social-contextual factors. From this perspective, self-conception, relationship variables, and social supports are particularly relevant as contributing protective and risk elements (Florsheim et al., 2003). For example, if a new mother feels well supported by her partner and extended family members, she is likely to adjust to the role of motherhood with greater ease.

The impact of the first child on the marital relationship has been particularly well documented in the literature; as Cowan and Cowan (1995) report, “we can conclude with some confidence that the transition to parenthood constitutes a period of stressful and sometimes maladaptive change for a significant proportion of new parents” (p. 412). The emphasis, however, has frequently been on the mother’s dissatisfaction. For example, another study by Cowan and Cowan and colleagues (Cowan, Cowan, Heming, Coysh, Curtis-Boles, & Boles, 1985) found that within the first six months of the infant’s life, new mothers showed a significant negative change in overall marital satisfaction, in comparison to their husbands and childless counterparts.

The increased susceptibility of mothers to negative marital change has been consistently reported in the literature (Belsky, Lang, & Huston, 1986; Glade, Bean, & Vira, 2005); a study by Ruble and colleagues (Ruble, Fleming, Hackel, & Stangor, 1988) suggests that women’s expectations of gender roles during pregnancy have been found to be particularly salient predictors of marital harmony postpartum. Furthermore, prior to becoming parents, many couples have relatively egalitarian divisions of household labour, but following the birth of the first child most revert to more “traditional” roles, with the woman taking on the majority of the housework and child care duties (Ruble et al., 1988). Research has suggested that women who self-identify as less traditional will be more dissatisfied in the marital relationship when gender roles shift towards greater traditionalism following the birth of the first child (Hackel & Ruble, 1992). In this context, Ruble et al. (1988) found that a discrepancy between expectations and actual postpartum experience contributed to marital decline after the birth of the first baby, when events turned out to be less positive than anticipated. Consequently, the women reported feeling negative feelings towards their husbands as the diversity in the division of labour increased, with mothers tackling much more of the housework and child care than they had envisioned.

However, not all studies have shown a decline in marital satisfaction after the arrival of the first child (e.g. Belsky & Rovine, 1990); as Hackel and Ruble (1992) reported, women with more traditional values about marital roles reported an increase in marital satisfaction when their share of child care and housework increased beyond their expectation. Hackel and Ruble (1992) suggest that a woman with a more “feminine gender personality” (p.954) would feel greater gratification at the prospect of more time with her infant, and a sense of competence and expertise from maintaining a well-organised household by themselves.

The pivotal change to a woman’s self-definition and identity, across the transition to motherhood, has been another prominent focus of the psychological literature to date. For example, a study by Deutsch and colleagues (Deutsch, Ruble, Fleming, Brooks-Gunn, Stangor, 1988) described a process of ‘self-socialisation’ in which women construct their identity and self-concept by actively seeking out relevant information and testing self-definitions for their impending role change to motherhood. Following the birth, the women were noted to change the constructs of their self-definition from indirect sources of information, such as books and other people, to direct experience with their babies. This self-socialisation process was viewed as a coping strategy for the women, as the information sought allowed the women to envision themselves in a maternal role, with the effect of engendering a more positive self-evaluation and self-definition (Deutsch et al., 1988). However, as

their experiences shifted to direct care with their infants following the birth, the baby's temperament had a consequential effect on the mother's efficaciousness with, not surprisingly, mothers caring for easy babies reporting a more positive self-evaluation.

The change to personal goals across the transition to motherhood has also been shown to determine the effects of self-evaluation. For example, a longitudinal study by Salmela-Aro and colleagues (Salmela-Aro, Nurmi, Saisto & Halmesmaki, 2001) focused on the emotional consequences resulting from the reconstruction of personal goals, during the various transitions through pregnancy and early motherhood, including a final assessment at two years' postpartum. The main findings revealed that an increased focus on self-related goals, that is goals relating to oneself and one's capabilities as a mother, as opposed to birth-related (for example, the baby's health) or family-related (for example, her husband) predicted an increase in depressive symptoms at any stage across the transition to motherhood. Moreover, an increase in depressive symptoms following childbirth predicted a decline in family-related goals and an increase in self-related goals (Salmela-Aro et al., 2001). Salmela-Aro et al. (2001) suggest that the mothers who focused their goals primarily on themselves were less able to handle the transitional stages and as such, these self-related goals did not motivate the required behaviour and effort needed to deal successfully with the demands and challenges of motherhood.

There were, however, several limitations to Salmela-Aro et al.'s study (2001); to elaborate, the methodology used was not able to distinguish between negatively and positively assessed goals. Negatively assessed self-focused goals have previously been associated with depressive symptoms and also a tendency to dwell passively on undesirable aspects of the self (Salmela-Aro & Nurmi, 1997). The study also failed to consider other life events the women may have been experiencing at that time, which may have subsequently affected the nature of their goals and emotional disposition. Overall, by Salmela-Aro et al.'s (2001) own admittance, the style of questioning and methodology reflected a somewhat limited, simplified, and straightforward approach to the complex area of human emotion and motivation.

The methodological and conceptual limitations of quantitative research, in reference to the experiences of mothering, have been pointed out by a number of qualitative researchers (e.g. Johnson, Burrows & Williamson, 2004; Smith, 1999a). Recent qualitative studies have aspired to present a more detailed picture of the experiences of women, from the women's own perspective, which could not be achieved by the typical quantitative measures often used in psychological research. For example, a study by Barlow and Cairns (1997) using grounded theory methodology, explored the psychological processes women go through during the transitional stages of pregnancy followed by the first 12 years of mothering. The findings revealed two distinct stages of personal growth; the first of these involved the women's initial intentions to mother and the subsequent first year postpartum, and the second phase represented the longer time span of adjusting to the day-to-day demands and the year-to-year realities of child rearing.

The salient factors for the individual women during the first stage involved feelings of inadequacy, often resulting from the lack of a positive role model and maternal rejection from their own mothers; an increased sense of self-efficacy and self-definition of the "right thing to do" (Barlow & Cairns, 1997, p.238); and engaging

in a process of self-socialisation during which certain participants initiated self-monitoring strategies, or sought to emulate inspirational role models, in order to hone their own effective parenting skills. The second stage was characterized by the women struggling with the decision to return to work or feeling “devalued” by their role of “housewife” (p.240). In addition, all women involved in the study reported having to renegotiate their marital relationships, whether that concerned their partner’s lack of motivation in childrearing tasks or accepting a less egalitarian role in the relationship, reminiscent of Ruble et al.’s (1988) research cited above. It is worth noting that Barlow and Cairns (1997) final sample of participants included several who were either separated or divorced.

Other significant factors to emerge from the study included the women coming to terms with a lost sense of identity, which caused certain individuals to reflect on a time of personal crisis, “I can’t be a mother and pursue my own personal happiness” (p. 241) and thus, the struggle to balance their own needs with the needs of their child. The main implications from the study emphasised the complexity of the mothering role; as a process of continuous re-evaluation of personal change, growth, and development and as such, formed part of the inspiration for this study

A study by Johnson, Burrows, and Williamson (2004) offers a more focused qualitative approach for first-time mothers and accentuates the psychological impact of body changes during pregnancy. The results highlight the impact of gender ideologies on the women’s self-concept of their developing bodies and the subsequent negative consequences. Nevertheless, this study was limited in the sense that it failed to reassess the women following childbirth, which has been shown as a time when women are less satisfied with their weight and shape than during the pregnancy itself (Wood Baker, Carter, Cohen, & Brownell, 1999). For example, a recent qualitative study by Clark and colleagues, (Clark, Skouteris, Wertheim, Paxton, & Milgrom, 2009) found that the majority of their pregnant participants responded positively to their changing bodies; however a significant majority of the postpartum group experienced a time of increased body dissatisfaction. In general, unrealistic expectations regarding the speed of returning to pre-pregnancy weight and shape were perceived as one of the main contributing factors to their negative body image. The psychological impact of bodily changes following childbirth, as part of the broader framework of a women’s self-concept, continues to be an expanding area of research and as such, is salient to this study.

Arguably, thus far, the most extensive qualitative research on the transition to motherhood and beyond, within a psychological context, has been carried out by Smith (1994; 1999a; & 1999b), who has strongly emphasised a theoretical model to illustrate the transformation to a woman’s sense of identity and her relational self during the transitional stages to becoming a mother. As an example, during one of his studies, Smith (1999a) found that the women shifted their focus internally during their pregnancy, to a more personal world involving immediate family members and specific individuals, although notably the particular individuals the women turned to varied in each case. Smith (1999a) suggests that this increased interpersonal contact can lead to a changing conception of self, as related to others, and one that is analogous with Mead’s symbolic interactionism. Mead’s (1934) extensive work on the relational self portrays a self that “can only exist in definite relations to other selves...our selves exist and enter into our experience only in so far as the selves of others exist and enter as such into our experience also” (p. 164). In this context,

Mead (1934) asserts that individuals' social contact with significant others facilitates an awareness of a sense of personal identity within a relational perspective; in other words, our self-conception arises and is continually modified through salient interpersonal relationships.

The significance of a psychological relationship between a symbolic self and others is evident in Smith's (1999b) second study; in which he notes that without exception all of his women define themselves through interpersonal contact with significant others. For some, social gatherings provide an opportunity to engage with important others facilitating them to reflect on their own sense of identity, positively or negatively, and impending roles as mothers. In this way, Smith (1999b) asserts that pregnancy provides an important time of preparation when women can 'rehearse' taking on the role of mother.

Nevertheless, although Smith's (1999a; 1999b) last interview with his participants is at five months postpartum, the main emphasis of his research is on the transition and psychological preparation for motherhood. A slight deviation from this is a study by Smith in 1994, which compares the current and retrospective accounts of the women's transitions to motherhood. During this study Smith notes how the women, in varying ways 5 months after childbirth, reconstruct themselves in their retrospective accounts of their pregnancies; that is, in comparison to their original 'real-time' accounts. Smith compares his findings to previous empirical studies, illustrating how participants are motivated to change factual aspects of the past, in order to promote their self-concept in the present. In other words, by downplaying the past, individuals are self-enhancing the present. This may be a particularly salient point for the current study, as the participants are looking back on their transition to motherhood from a retrospective viewpoint. Smith (1994) suggests that for his case studies, the women construct various self-enhancing narratives during their self-reflection, eliciting a psychological need to construct or retain a sense of order by emphasising how they themselves remained constant through the transition, or at other times de-emphasising or 'forgetting' certain aspects of it. Smith (1994) once again compares this to Mead's philosophy in depicting the individual as an "active agent able to monitor and modify her/his view of the self" (p.372).

Once more, Smith (1994) elicits some interesting revelations that may be comparable to this study; however, the central feature of his research is on the psychological transition to motherhood and not the psychological effects thereafter. Having said that, the current study has taken inspiration from Smith's distinctive qualitative approach to psychology, focusing on how individuals make sense of their experiences and in particular, his research towards motherhood. Consequently, the aim of this study was to extend that period and explore the first few years of motherhood, with the hope of eliciting the mother's subjective accounts of the psychological effects on the self and her interpersonal world. The rationale stems from the current paucity of qualitative research, within the psychological field, assessing the impact of mothering on women's sense of self and interpersonal relationships; as Glade et al. (2005) elucidate, the actual biological experience of becoming a parent happens in a relatively short space of time when a baby enters the world and takes its first breath, yet the psychosocial transition is a much more lengthy process, beginning with the initial decision to have children and continuing through pregnancy and the early years of a child's life.

Accordingly, this study will take a retrospective account of those first few years following childbirth and encourage the mothers to 'relive' their experiences through sequential stages. Qualitative research has been considered particularly appropriate where the field of interest is characterised by complexity and ambiguity and a lack of prior research (Richardson, 1996) and as such, is the chosen methodology for this study. The major concern of this study was whether the transition has had significant effects on the women's self-concept, identity, and interpersonal relationships and if so, whether these effects can be related to prior theory and research, both qualitative and quantitative, as described above.

## **METHOD**

### **Design**

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured one-on-one interviews, considered to be the exemplary method for the researcher's chosen analysis (Eatough & Smith, 2008). The study focused on what mothers themselves had to say about the realities of motherhood, interpersonal relationships, and changes to their sense of self. Qualitative research attempts to describe phenomena as they are rather than manipulate variables. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith & Osborn, 2003) is a form of phenomenological inquiry which aims to explore in detail how participants make sense of their personal experiences and "lifeworld", rather than testing preconceived hypotheses; "the aim is to explore, flexibly and in detail, an area of concern" (Smith, 2003, p.53).

The choice of IPA as methodology for this study was based on the desire for an idiographic approach, in which the centrality and meaning of the participants' subjective experiences of becoming a parent could be explored and engaged with. This involved a degree of interpretative activity on the part of the researcher, referred to as a two-stage process by Smith and Osborn (2003), whereby "participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants making sense of their world" (p.51). Thus, the interpretative process combines an empathetic hermeneutic with a questioning hermeneutic; in order words, aspiring to understand from the participant's point of view whilst querying the underlying intent. IPA is also thought to be interrogative in its ability to contribute to and question existing psychological research and may elucidate as well as constructively critique previous findings. Consequently, in the absence of a pre-determined hypothesis, it was hoped that any themes and concerns emerging from the data could subsequently be examined in the light of literature and research deemed relevant to the material.

### **Participants**

N = 5. As per an increasing prerequisite for IPA methodology (Smith & Osborn, 2003), purposive homogeneous sampling was used and a small number of participants selected for their ability to illuminate the original aim of the study; in this context, this entailed more mature mothers who had previously held successful careers in their own right. Equally significant to this study was the fact that all participants were in long-term relationships with the father of their children, the children themselves having been planned, and the oldest child not being more than 5



years old. Participants were recruited through personal contacts of the researcher with no incentives offered. All participants were British and either Caucasian or Asian. Individual relevant demographics are listed below:

Fran, 38, PhD in Immunology, three children; male twins aged 2 years and a son 7 months.

Chloe, 40, ex-professional dancer, two children; a son aged 4 years and a daughter 18 months.

Rebecca, 40, ex-professional dancer; one son aged 4 years.

Lucy, 40, ex-professional dancer, two children; a daughter aged 5 years and a son 3 years.

Amy, 43, design consultant, two children; a daughter aged 2 years and son 9 months.

The names of the women and members of their families have been changed to protect confidentiality.

## **Procedure**

### **Data collection**

A 45 minute semi-structured pilot interview was carried out with a 40 year old mother who had previously held a successful career as a professional dancer. This enabled the researcher to assess the appropriateness of the interview questions and to refine the researcher's interview technique. No changes were made to the questions, although the researcher learnt to minimise prompts and appreciate the importance of allowing participants adequate time to formulate their thoughts and answers, without the need to "fill" the silences.

The interview schedule was underpinned by previous qualitative research into the transition (Smith, 1999; Millward, 2006) as well as the early stages of motherhood (e.g. Lewis & Nicolson, 1998). Questions arose from a temporal perspective spanning the mother's experiences from initially trying to conceive, to successively becoming pregnant, through the early stages of motherhood, and finally on to a more reflexive period once the role of motherhood had been established and the possibility, or reality, of additional children had extended itself. The main questions concerned:

- Can you tell me about your experiences of becoming a mother?
- What aspects of your life would you say changed the most when you first became a parent?
- How has becoming a mum affected your relationship with others?
- In what way would you say your own identity has evolved since becoming a parent?
- With the benefit of hindsight is there anything that you would have liked to have changed?

Questions were phrased in an open-ended manner and the interview style was deliberately non-directive, permitting flexibility to introduce personally salient

issues raised by the participants; a central premise of IPA (Eatough & Smith, 2008). Interesting trajectories were pursued through the use of probes such as, "Could you elaborate on that a little more...Do you remember how that made you feel?" The interviews varied between 45 minutes and one-and-a-half hours depending on the individual.

In the first instance, ethics approval was obtained from the TVU dissertation research ethics' committee. Participants were then contacted by telephone, informed of the nature of the study, and asked if they were interested in participating. A convenient time for the interview was established and then carried out in the researcher's home, a familiar territory to all participants, and where minimal interruptions could be assured. Prior to the commencement of the interview, participants were asked to complete and sign a consent form (as per the appendix), agreeing to participation and the recording of the interview. Part of this briefing included informing participants of their right to halt the interview at any time, refuse a particular question, or withdraw their data up to the point of first submission of the study. The topic of the research area was disclosed a priori and participants were fully debriefed after. Additionally, participants were assured of confidentiality of the interview material and anonymity of their identities; pseudonyms have been used throughout the study.

### **Data analysis**

All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The analysis of transcripts was conducted according to Smith and Osborn's (2003) guidelines. Starting with one interview at a time, each transcript was read and reread several times, along with the audiotapes, to familiarise the researcher with its contents. The objective was to obtain a holistic perspective engendering interpretations to be grounded within the participants' accounts. Any interesting or significant points were noted in the left hand margin. After several readings when no further points of interest could be identified, the right hand margin was then used allowing the initial notes to evolve into emerging themes. These emerging themes were constantly checked with the transcript to ensure a close connection was not lost with the original data. The emergent themes were then listed chronologically on a separate piece of paper and any connections noted, resulting in certain themes clustering together and others emerging as "superordinate" concepts (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Interviews were analysed independently to avoid imposing the beliefs of one participant on to another. This iterative process was then repeated on the remaining transcripts. At this stage respondent validation was achieved by providing each participant with a copy of her transcript and analysis. All concurred with the themes generated and no amendments were made. Copies of all five transcripts are attached in the appendix.

The subsequent stage of analysis involved a comparison of themes across the five transcripts generating a consolidated list of themes. A smaller number of higher order or 'master' themes emerged after a process of integrating or making connections between the themes. During this stage of the analysis, in keeping with the central tenets of IPA methodology, the focus remained on the emerging themes direct from the participants' data, rather than trying to fit any pre-existing theoretical framework. However, in the discussion section a more formal theoretical perspective

will be sought, in order to incorporate relevant psychological literature and theory with the aim of making sense of the emerging analysis.

## RESULTS

Data analysis yielded 5 master themes and 12 subthemes as presented in Table 1 below. An explanation of the emergent master and subthemes will be described in the following section accompanied with examples from the transcripts in order to facilitate the understanding of the analysis for the reader. This will be followed by the integration of relevant theory and literature in the ensuing discussion section, as per one of Smith's (2003) IPA guidelines.

<b>Master themes</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>
<b>1. From wife to mother/husband to father – renegotiating marital roles</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intensified bond with husband</li> <li>• Adjusting roles and priorities</li> <li>• Loss of autonomy &amp; freedom</li> </ul>
<b>2. Self-constructed motherhood</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disequilibrium and loss of control</li> <li>• Wanting the best</li> <li>• Social comparison with other mothers</li> </ul>
<b>3. Reliving the ghosts of one's childhood</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empathy towards mother</li> <li>• Maintaining the role of one's parents</li> </ul>
<b>4. Personal self – impact of initial transition</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loss of physical self &amp; identity</li> <li>• Preserving self</li> </ul>
<b>5. Personal self – striving for a new sense of identity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regaining control &amp; sense of self</li> <li>• A time of self-actualisation &amp; self-realisation</li> </ul>

**Table 1. Table displaying the master and subthemes from the analysis.**

The themes and associated quotations featured in this section do not necessarily follow the chronology of the interview, but have been structured to provide a coherent understanding of the women's experiences. Pauses in the quotations or any discarded text are indicated by three dots (...). Where an omission of word or words has been made, consideration has been taken not to distort or misrepresent the narratives. The full verbatim transcripts are available in the appendix. Alongside each quotation is an indication of where (i.e. page and line

number) they have been extracted from within the transcripts. All names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

### **From wife to mother/husband to father – renegotiating marital roles & responsibilities**

This master theme exemplifies the major transitional turning point in the lives of the women, as identities evolved from being solely husband and wife to that of father and mother as well, in addition to the shift in their relationships from couple to that of family unit. The arrival of the first baby necessitated a reallocation of role identity, as well as a restructuring of marital responsibilities. All of the women involved in this study took on the main responsibility for childcare with their husbands in the role of financial provider. The impact of these traditional roles had varying consequences on the women themselves as well as their relationships, eliciting feelings of embracement and contentment to that of confinement and powerlessness. Three salient subthemes emerged from this focal point; including an intensified bond with their husbands, the adjustment of roles and priorities, and a loss of autonomy and freedom.

#### ***Intensified bond with husband – a time of unity***

Despite the fact that the women's initial transitions to motherhood were inarguably individualistic, the primary decision to start a family was described by all participants as one that was premeditated and mutually agreed upon. This was followed by the subsequent joyous experience of discovering that they were pregnant, which was presented as a time of unity for all women involved; as Lucy admits, 'we were ecstatic when it happened'. The initial joy of pregnancy was understandably intensified for some of the women, with four out of the five of them having experienced some sort of difficulty conceiving. Two of the women, Fran and Amy, had both suffered at least one miscarriage prior to giving birth to their first child; an experience that has had a profound effect on both women, as Fran exclaims:

F: motherhood to me begins with all of the horrible stuff we had to go through with losing the first baby. (85 -15)

Interestingly, at this point in the analysis both of the two women excessively refer to 'we' rather than 'I', as though the traumatic experience of suffering at least one miscarriage, whilst physically experienced by the women themselves, was psychologically and emotional endured together as a couple. This unifying experience is clearly evident in Amy's account of their grieving process:

A: We should have recognised that loss, you know, before we moved on and tried again. Umm so the second time it happened we did...you know we kind of had...we'd learnt sort of from our first time around and so umm, so we did you know the whole thing; writing a letter and lighting a candle, and going to a lovely place and reading it out loud and burning the letter, and actually the reason I'm telling you this, is because I think that more than anything else cemented in both Kevin and mine minds the fact that we really wanted to be parents...it kind of meant that we were together on it a lot more... (69-15)

Following the birth of their first child, the five women noticeably became more idiosyncratic on their marital experience; in fact, although all women alluded to the

'huge impact' on their relationships, just one of them openly refers to it as a strengthening experience:

C: I think it's definitely strengthened our relationship. I mean we've both thoroughly enjoyed having them. It's like a umm, you know, you've had other boyfriends and things and you've sort of thought, oh you know, you've been through the experiences together but now I mean Adam and I have been through the experience of having children together. Nothing beats that, you know, it's like that's a high that can't be topped. (80-202)

### ***Adjusting roles and priorities - learning to adapt and compromise***

The transitional process of adjusting to the new roles of mother and father had a subsequent impact, whether positive or negative, for all mothers involved. Most of them openly referred to a shift in their focus on the marriage, a reorganisation of their priorities, and the impact of spending little time alone with their partners. Perhaps the most lucid account of this was made by Lucy:

L: I guess obviously my relationship with John changed because she was my focus rather than him...obviously I didn't have as much time for him as I did before...we still tried to make it that you know we didn't exclude the other person...I don't really remember him when Anna was first born. I just remember me and her even though he was around... (92-73)

On a similar level to some of the other women, Lucy sacrificed her own career in order to start a family, however, she clearly struggles to accept the new role of housewife; 'I don't think being a mother comes naturally to me'. This is further exacerbated by the lack of confidence she clearly feels in her husband as financial provider, as she goes on to propose an exchange of roles and marital responsibilities with her husband:

L: "if you want to be a full time father that's absolutely fine with me, I'll go out and get a full time job and support us. I've no problem in doing that but one of us needs to commit to doing one and one to the other."...So I think after a few years of realising that nothing was coming of what he was doing and I knew that I would just make it work that I just thought right, you're always around and then you do it full time because you know he'd come in and say, "Oh, it must be lovely being here all day"...but I found it really tough and lonely and boring, you know, I like to be out and achieving and feeling like I was accomplishing something. (93-133)

The revelation that Lucy feels being a mother equates to not accomplishing anything, exposes her true desire to be back out in the work force 'with an end goal' and achieving for herself. In general, the impact of caring for an infant changed the dynamics for all of the women's relationships as they were abruptly forced to mature, assume an adult role, and handle responsibility. The reversal of roles from child to parent is evident in Amy's account; however in contrast, the transition for Amy seems to have been embraced together as a couple:

A: before we had the kids we used to play together; we used to be children; we were children. We just used to muck about playing and that was actually part of our relationship, that was part of our thing, and actually having children has affected that in so much as we have to now be the grown-ups. (71-125)

Although Amy insinuates that at times the effect on their relationship has not always been 'positive', the prevailing message is one of unity and acceptance to compromise. Most of the women seem to have adopted a long-term outlook for their new roles as parents, with the optimistic belief that their roles and relationship can revert to their previous dynamics once the child or children are a little older. This sense of a coping strategy is inferred as Amy continues:

A: I hope that we can kind of go back to being children again. I'm sure we will when they're a little bit older, but the thing is that when you've got them this small and they're so needy, completely dependent on you for everything, and you are everything to them, you kind of have to be the grown-up... (71-131)

In a similar context, Fran recalls how her husband will ask for 'a cuddle' to be told that she needs him to do things, other more 'important' things, as they 'come first' now. She continues to confess her shock at the dramatic affect the transition has had on their relationship and an awareness of 'how people can split up over it'; nevertheless analogous to Amy's positive outlook, she enthuses:

F: I can see that it will get better as they get older so once they're...you know, it's all this kind of baby age, you know having the pram, not being able to get to places. It's all the kind of baggage that comes with having babies, once they're a bit older I think we're probably talking around 3 or 4, I think me and Mike will have more time for each other. There will obviously be other problems but, you know, it won't be the same taking the twins out, getting the buggy out, getting them dressed, you know, it all takes up the spare time that me and Mike can have chatting to each other while we're getting ready to go out. (86-87)

This period of role transition necessitated an increased dependence on emotional support from their partners. This is palpable when Rebecca attempts to overcome and conceal her disappointment in her husband's apparent rejection and unease of his newly acquired parental role:

R: I mean for Chris, I remember we went for our first walk with Zach and he just turned round to me and said "Oh my God, are we ever? You know, is this it now? Are we ever going have the same...as before?"...I mean, we had been full on together all of the time and you know, holidays and one thing or another, you can do whatever, can't you? But I think for Chris it was that sudden realisation, it was something I didn't really want to hear at the time, I was a bit too sensitive... (101-136)

Rebecca's coping strategy as she later admits that her husband 'never really got the baby thing' seems to evolve into justifying his reaction by social comparing him to her opinion of other fathers, 'I think it's what a lot of men feel anyway' and thus, in her own way learning to accept and compromise. The use of social comparison emerges as a salient tact at some point for all of the women. For example, Chloe, uses her comparison of others as the wisdom behind her own adaption, citing friends she's know who have 'struggled' with their marriages following parenthood, and the subsequent awareness her husband and herself adopted to counteract any demise of their own:

C: I would never have like got funny about his...thinking he's holding the baby wrong or anything. I would bite my tongue if I thought that...you know I would never criticise him. Umm and I think that he was, you know, very thoughtful and helped me get some extra sleep and you know we were very careful with each other because we were so aware that this might happen. That it could put a strain on... (80-195)

In respect to her role adjustment, it appears Chloe may have felt the least transition as she admits:

C: ...by the time I had kids, Adam and I were fairly blimin' boring anyway because we didn't go out much. We didn't, you know, we would just stay at home in our little house and actually life didn't change very much with regards to...I mean obviously it did having a baby and having to get used to looking after a baby but actual this thing of oh I didn't get to go out anymore...we didn't really go out anyway. (78-78)

Chloe continues to exude an overwhelming sense of gain rather than loss or compromise throughout her interview and provides a sometimes gratifying account in contrast to the other women.

### ***Loss of autonomy & freedom***

The word "autonomy" is derived from the Greek "autonomos", meaning the freedom to live by one's own laws, and demotes a sense of being in control of one's life. All of the mothers in this study ceased working full time after the arrival of their first child, transferring the responsibility of the household income to their partners. The loss to their occupational sub-identities, as well as the loss of control to their financial independence, emerged as a salient consequence for all of the women. Three of the women, in particular, articulated this feeling of financial constraint:

F: I notice that I can't...you know that I'm not working and so I don't have my own money...So that's really been a huge change....yeah that's been a huge change. (86-72)

L: I guess not being able to do what I wanted to do at any time. You know I'm quite...you know before she [her daughter] came along I was quite umm spontaneous and if there was something I wanted to do, if financially I was able to do it, then I would just do it. You know, I want to go there, I've got the money, okay I'm just gonna go; whereas that, you know, obviously changes. (92-68)

C: one of the backlashes of being at home with them is that I don't earn money, so I haven't got spare money to go and just buy new clothes. So I feel like I'm wearing the same old blimin' boring stuff and umm, you know, so there's an element of that definitely with regards to self identity. (83-402)

However, the loss to their financial freedom wasn't the only loss experienced; a more profound sense of loss was engendered to their sense of self, as the full impact of their maternal responsibility and the permanency of their new role took effect. This sense of loss to their freedom was felt by almost all the women; when asked what aspects of their lives had changed the most, their answers reflect a feeling of being confined to their homes, a loss of independence, and the sense of pressure and responsibility of putting their maternal self before their personal self:

R: You can't just pop down the road whenever you want to and all that sort of thing. I think umm that makes...that's the big difference...umm yeah and it's that whole...it's the responsibility suddenly you've got a huge responsibility there. (101-156)

F: Just my independence...definitely my independence...not being able to just get up and do whatever I want in the morning. I get up and even before I brush my teeth in the morning there's a child to take care of. I can't just get up and go to the corner

shop. I can't if I'm on my own. I actually cannot do that and I find that very strange. (86-51)

A: I don't really have much social life now and work wise goodness umm that's quite a change, 'cause I used to be working an awful lot... (70-88)

L: I found it really tough actually. I just felt like every day that I was alone and just me and Anna and you know just getting through a day... (91-33)

### **Self-constructed motherhood**

The emergence of a self-constructed motherhood reflects the women's own interpretation and understanding of the ubiquitous idealisation of a socially constructed motherhood; one is that is influenced by socio-cultural, political, and psychological views. This process involved the women actively seeking information on their new roles as mothers, being aware of the experience and standards of others, and learning to evaluate themselves in comparison to their personal definition of the role of a 'good mother', as opposed to a socially constructed one. This last point involved developing self-empathy; a sympathetic adjudicator when their techniques failed and the external response from the 'medical profession' and 'breastfeeding mafia' was one of 'tremendous pressure' and a general lack of empathic concern. Three subthemes emerged from this perspective; disequilibrium and loss of control, wanting the best and a reality different from the ideal, and social comparison with other mothers.

#### ***Disequilibrium & loss of control***

This subtheme emerged for those mothers who had suffered a traumatic birth experience and though specific for only two of the women, was included to acknowledge the profound continuing effects the birth experience had on their adjustment to motherhood. Both Rebecca and Amy endured a stressful birth experience and, perhaps not coincidentally, were the only two women to directly refer to some form of postnatal depression. The state of disequilibrium and loss of control portrays their perception of complete powerlessness during labour, delivery, and the initial postpartum period, resulting in an experience far removed from their idealisation. Amy alludes to her emotional state, and her belief that she was 'suffering from postnatal depression' fairly early on in the interview, which she attributes to the birth of her first child. This is evident in the following example in which she compares the birth experience between her two children; Ella, her first, and David, her second:

A: I think maybe the thing that helped to make a difference was that I had skin to skin with him [David] because I knew to insist on it... (70-64). I had an emergency caesarean with Ella and an elective one with David so...it was calmer and it was a bit more stress free with David because we were planning for it, but with Ella even though it was an emergency and it was all rushed and stressed and whatever, when she was delivered they took her away and they cleaned her up and put her in a sleep suit before I saw her. So umm I don't think I had that same bonding that I had with David...so it's been less of a trauma... (70-72)

Amy directly attributes her depression and difficulty in bonding with her first child to her birth experience. The fact that she 'knew to insist' on a skin-to-skin experience with her second, intimates an inner strength and determination to engender a better



experience for her second time. Similarly, Rebecca also found herself in the unfortunate position of having an emergency caesarean, with the additional trauma of enduring complications as a result of the epidural. She relates this experience to her initial feelings of disequilibrium following the birth, and later acknowledges an awareness of her negative emotional state, 'a little bit of post natal going on', throughout that early transition:

R: the actual giving birth was horrific...after that I think things suddenly umm you know my whole equilibrium changed...it took me a long time to get over the birth. (99-41). I had that epidural that went wrong and so I had to go back into hospital afterwards. You know umm when your brain drops cause there's a little bit of fluid that comes out. I can't think of what it's called now but umm...yeah...so that happened and then I went home and then I couldn't move and I had to go back into hospital and there was that chance that you can become paralysed when you have a reversal done. So that was all a little bit frightening at the time. (99-55)

Both Amy and Rebecca, having endured a less than idyllic start to motherhood, express difficulties in their maternal roles for the first couple of months; both women also experienced breastfeeding problems and babies they found 'difficult' to control, resulting in a negative self-efficacy, which is portrayed in their accounts in the ensuing themes.

### ***Wanting the best & a reality different from their ideal***

This subtheme reflects the women's best intentions for their parenting skills and welfare of their offspring. This was tenuously linked to their self-efficacy and disposition of their babies; with a tangible negative association between difficulties in child temperament and lowered self-belief. The aim and perception of being a good mother was synonymous with wanting the best and a reflection of the women's idealised views of motherhood; their conception of a motherhood that had been socially constructed and was inevitably unattainable and imperfect in their own reality. As would be expected, the women varied in their level of self-criticism and interestingly, the number of disparaging comments they made about themselves appeared to decrease as they recounted their experiences chronologically, as though the passage of time engendered self-empathy and afforded them a more unbiased outlook.

The sharp contrast of reality in comparison to their preconceived 'ideal' is depicted in Amy's account:

A: the thing that surprised me so completely was umm how unlike it...in my head I sort of had this vision of motherhood...the picture that I had kind of built up in my head of how it was going to be, was so not like what it was...she had colic, she cried all of the time, she couldn't breastfeed, or she didn't breastfeed, or she wasn't getting enough from breastfeeding, so she wasn't putting on weight and there's a tremendous pressure put on you...there wasn't much tolerance given for umm if the breastfeeding wasn't working they [medical profession] sort of started to go "well, you need to give formula" after all that indoctrination of breast is best...I found it very difficult and I was suffering from postnatal depression after Ella was born and that was very difficult...(69-40)

The association between her daughter's temperament and difficulty with feeding, and her own self-concept are seen reflected in Amy's emotional account above. Although

her self-depreciation seems to have been ameliorated when her second experience is more indicative of her 'vision of motherhood':

A: the thing actually I find so uplifting about this whole thing is that second time around is so completely different. You know, David umm is a lovely baby and not that Ella wasn't, but he doesn't have colic and that makes such a difference and he's not demanding and he's just lovely... (70-59)

The causal effect of breastfeeding problems on the woman's maternal self-efficacy is also elucidated by Rebecca:

R: Zach just wasn't feeding and I for six weeks, I tried for him to feed and umm he just didn't take it and he just didn't sleep at all. He was crying continually and then when he went to the breast he just fell asleep so he wasn't eating. So it was like a vicious circle and because I just wanted so desperately for it, you know, as we all do, for it to be umm...doing things the right way...as you want and it err didn't happen. So in the end I decided no enough was enough and as soon as he went to the bottle, he was a different baby and he was glugging it back and I thought, "oh my goodness, I've starved my poor child" (laughs) trying to do things the right way. (100-65)

Rebecca's difficulties in feeding her baby herself were clearly a low point in her desire of wanting the best. It's almost as though her baby's lack of fulfilment with the breastfeeding is taken as a personal blow to her ability to mother, and is certainly a departure from her a priori vision of being 'sat there and your baby's feeding from you and all of that'. There is, though, a noticeable interjection of self-deprecating humour; 'I've starved my poor child', inferring a more pragmatic side to herself. The realisation that wanting the best for their baby may also mean a compromise of their ideals, depicts how most of the women eventually learnt to accept their own limitations and acknowledge the rewards of mothering.

In this context Fran found herself in the position of having any possibility of control taken from her, when her premature twins were kept in special care for several weeks and as such, her reality abruptly became very different from her ideals. Rather than trying to fight her position of powerlessness, she rather pragmatically surrenders to it:

F:...when I saw them in special care I felt helpless and although the doctors are in there for a reason and you have to watch them for the first year because it might have an impact on their development and you feel you can't do anything about it...you just have to let it be and I think that's made us very relaxed as parents; you just have to let go. So that's, you know, like I said why I'm not the parent that I thought I would be...but I think that has had an impact on me and Mike we've just....they've survived it so they will be fine. We just do what we can but we don't kind of over protect them. (89-220)

For Fran, the benefit of her time with the babies in special care, while distressing for that duration, has in a sense liberated her from becoming a potentially 'highly strung' parent and culminated in a more philosophical viewpoint. Learning to overcome their initial difficulties proved to be a catalyst for most of the mothers in developing a personal philosophy towards mothering and as such, one not reliant on socially accepted principles of the rights and wrongs of motherhood.

### ***Social comparison with other mothers***

The theory of social comparison refers to the process of comparing one's own conduct with that of others in order to evaluate oneself (Festinger, 1954). In this context, the women compared their own attributes, behaviour, achievements, and understanding with other mothers and appeared to evaluate their own self-experience as a result. This was epitomised most effectively in Chloe's account, as she appears to use her knowledge of others' behaviour and attitudes as a way of verifying her own maternal experience:

C: Well I think a lot of people are guilty of perhaps being a bit fed up at work and thinking "oh, I'd love to have a baby and I can stay home" (laughs). And they absolutely don't realise that in fact going to work is a doddle compared to staying at home and looking after a baby... (78-114)

The subliminal, and perhaps incongruous, message from this statement is most evident when put into context with the knowledge that Chloe has, at this point, already confessed to not wanting to find another career or job. However, the battle of her conscience in feeling she ought to help contribute to their household income is also expressed, 'that's not practical; you've got to earn a living' and thus, her slightly judgemental attitude appears to stem from her guilt, enabling a propensity to defend the 'stay-at-home' mothers.

This frame of reference was similarly used in the comparison of others' relationships, as Chloe once again appears to judge others in order to validate her own understanding:

C: I can't imagine people actually doing it, but evidently people do have them to try and sort of save a relationship. Well I mean, my goodness, if anything's going to kill it, 'cause you know you can get so ratty with each other and you're sleep deprived and I think Adam and I were so aware of the fact that this could happen... (80-185)

It's almost as though assessing others enables the women to define their own value system and the 'rights' and 'wrongs' of parenting. In a similar context, Fran uses her comparison of others to confirm her own beliefs and philosophy of mothering:

F: ...like I see other mums who have had kids, for instance I've got a friend who's had one baby and all of a sudden she hasn't got time for anything in the world, it's just her and her baby and I don't understand that. I think but, you know, your life is not just about....you live on a planet. That's your world. How can you stop everything else? You know, one day you may need friends or family, you know, she's almost isolated herself and I can understand that's easily done but for me it's the opposite. I feel like because I've got them I've got to open up my world even more umm and I've always strived to do that, even before they came. I've always wanted to make more friends and things so I just want to do it even more, so it's just intensified it. (88-185)

An indirect form of comparison can be elucidated from Rebecca's desperation in her active search for guidance and information; with the absence of anyone in person around her, she turns her search to books offering advice and encompassing the written experience of other women:

R: At the very very beginning it was tough because I felt very lost, I was falling over books. I had books everywhere; you know looking what I should be doing here, what I should be doing there. Thinking I haven't got a bloody clue [laughs] and you know it was that whole thing; oh if Mum had been here, if somebody had been here just to...just to help, just to phone me, just to guide me and I felt like, oh there was no

guidance and I think that in itself is part, you know, I look back and I think wow, you know, I got on and I did it and I think you have to go inside, you have to go within. It's all very well having all the books but at the end of the day you just have to be quiet and look within. You just have to trust your own intuition is guiding you... (103-276)

The uplifting revelation from Rebecca's account is her own enlightenment in discovering her answers for herself and developing a personally defined philosophy of mothering guided by her own 'intuition', rather than one constructed by societal expectation.

Though in a different context, Rebecca's negative self-efficacy reveals a tendency to compare her difficulties in breastfeeding with her belief in other mothers' maternal efficiency:

R: When you look at mothers and they're feeding and everything seems so calm and umm, you know, I just think oh [sighs and laughs]. But whether that's just a thing that you look through with rose tinted glasses, I don't know. (100-95)

However, Rebecca appears to try and rationalise her beliefs by develop a sense of self-empathy and asks rhetorically:

R: There's always something isn't there, that's not quite as you would want it to be? (100-102)

In contrast to the other women, Lucy already appears to have a strong sense of her own philosophy of mothering; although admittedly the prevailing theme throughout her interview is a focus on her relationship with herself and separately, her estranged husband, resulting in the relationship with her children appearing, from the limits of her account, to take a subordinate place in her thoughts. Nevertheless, her own construct of mothering and at times indirect comparison to other parents' choices for childrearing are worthy of reference:

L: I've always been very get on with it kind of thing with my kids...I felt that I didn't want her to go into a nursery or you know, have a childminder or whatever... (92-105)

### **Reliving the ghosts of one's childhood**

This master theme draws attention to the idiosyncratic results engendered by this style of analysis and as such, was an extremely diverse though salient area for all participants. Its emergence acknowledges the powerful presence family members can have in influencing the journey to motherhood and the repercussions on one's sense of self. The theme title was particularly apt for both Rebecca and Amy who had lost both of their parents prior to the arrival of their first child; although the context of 'ghosts' was primarily inspired by the women's accounts, reflecting the recurring memories and cross-comparisons often elicited with one's own childhood. The two subthemes to evolve were empathy towards mother (and in one case, father) and maintaining the role of one's parents.

#### ***Empathy towards mother (& father)***

For all of the women being a daughter captured a new perspective following motherhood, eliciting an empathic understanding of the conditions experienced by one's own mother, as well as a reconsideration of the women's own recollections of

being mothered. This latter phenomenon was by its very nature a reflective highly individual account of their memories of childhood.

For Lucy this recollection led her to her memories of maternal rejection wherein her mother had 'never been affectionate or loving' but one that, perhaps surprisingly, culminated in blame being diffused and empathy emerging, as the accountability of her mother's behaviour was considered from a fresh perspective:

L: My Mum completely changed actually...as soon as Anna came along she was just kissing her and cuddling her and playing with her, and I was really shocked and it was lovely to see actually...she just opened up and I guess didn't feel threatened, or inhibited, or that she couldn't do it; so yeah she was great. (95-236)

Asked to reflect on her emotions at this point, Lucy goes on to justify her mother's behaviour:

L: I kind of saw it that if she was doing it to my daughter she was kind of doing it to me, so I never really... 'cause I kind of understood why she was so inhibited and held back umm so you know, when she used to say to Anna that she loved her, I kind of thought in a way she's kind of saying it to me so that's really nice. (95-246)

Lucy's self-reflection of her mother's affection without any apparent signs of resentment or regret is enlightening. She appears to take a philosophical view; empathising and forgiving of her mother's previous disposition and perhaps resonant of the fact that she no longer feels the child in the relationship, dependent of her mother's physical affection for her own wellbeing.

Whereas Lucy's empathic understanding involves her mother, an analogous account is recollected by Fran with her father, although the ensuing reaction is comparably different:

F: I see my Dad playing with the boys and it really affected me a few weeks ago. I never had that with him because at their age he always worked abroad and it actually quite upset me because I'm actually quite close to my Dad. I mean it's weird, how can you feel like this being, you know, being 38 years old? And it affects me. So you see him doing things with your kids. It's very strange...yeah I see my Dad making up for time and I think but I'm your child, I wish I'd had this with you. So that...that I mean he needs to do it but I think he also realises how much fun children can be. Before you know he was at an age where it was all about his career and stuff like that...but at the same time it's brought us closer because my parents have always been loving towards me...(87-125)

The last couple of extracts provide an opportune time to compare diverse reactions for analogous events; having said that, Fran's feelings do appear at times to be in conflict. To elaborate, she appears to have a very close relationship with her father that has only intensified since having her twins, but evidently there is also a feeling of resentment and regret for her own loss and compromise as a child. Perhaps where Lucy has taken the perspective of an adult, Fran appears to still view herself as the 'child' in the relationship. Although in the presence of her family, Fran seems to retain her inner feelings to herself and manages to empathise with the limitations that restricted her father's parenting at the time. Another possibility is that Lucy is able to detach herself emotionally from the situation with her mother; whereas Fran is still very much involved and views herself as part of the family unit. This inference would have the benefit of explaining the difference in reaction and maybe worth reviewing in

context with Lucy's account in the following theme. This analysis also reflects the underpinnings of attachment theory, which purports to explain varying reactions in the child-caregiver relationship and as such, may prove beneficial in comparing Lucy and Fran's attachment styles.

A completely different experience was that of Rebecca's, whose poignant account of the conversations she had with her late mother clearly reflect an increased bond and understanding, of both her mother as well as their relationship:

R: When my Mum was pregnant with me umm she used to have orange after orange after orange and...all I could see were these oranges and I kept on thinking, "are you trying to send me a message, Mum?" And I even bought a book with oranges on the cover [laughs]. I was obsessed by oranges and then as soon as I found out, that went. It was like incredible really. (99-27)

This heartfelt account infers a strong attachment to her mother and one that is evidently still important to her after losing her mother to ill health over a decade before.

Amy is similarly in the unenviable position of having lost both of her parents before embarking on motherhood and with the benefit of hindsight, can now empathise with her mother's experience with a sense of reproachfulness:

A: When I was younger I never wanted to have kids at all umm and I remember talking to my Mum...I was 20 when she died umm and I said to her, "I don't want children" and she looked really hurt and she said, "You can't say that"...and at the time I didn't and I couldn't really understand why she was looking so hurt but now I understand that if Ella said to me "I don't want children" and sort of negated that side of her potential life, when I knew what fulfilment there was in it, I would probably feel quite hurt.(75-314)

By becoming a mother herself, Amy is now able to empathise with her late mother by understanding how she would feel in a similar scenario with her own daughter. In some ways analogous with Louise; Amy no longer sees herself as the child in the relationship, instead taking an adult parental perspective.

The last of the five women, Chloe, speaks liberally about her own mother, reflecting on a renewed 'appreciation' and awareness after having become a mother herself:

C: You sort of appreciate what they will have been through and I think that I probably did because obviously, you know, you think gosh what she went through...I was poorly, this sort of tiny baby I couldn't keep my food down and projectile vomited everywhere [laughs] for the first several weeks and she walked the floor with me. How's that? I mean honestly, I think that would have umm...again I have been lucky to have good babies and touch wood so far I've never had major issues like that to deal with. Whereas I think that would have been...you know, God, I don't know how I would have coped with that. So, yes, I think probably my respect in that way, thinking about her with small children has really umm gone up. (80-214)

Chloe's account exudes respect and admiration for her mother and has a self-deprecating feel to it. She clearly holds her mother in high regard with the effect of comparing herself disparagingly, as though she doesn't believe she could live up to her mother's standards.

Also enlightening is the fact that Chloe observes signs of her own childhood being reflected in her son's character and expressions of vulnerability, enabling her to empathise with her mother's parental role at that time:

C: ...he's going through a very sensitive phase at the moment. He keeps worrying about things... (80-226)...the point being about this, I know what I was like for my Mum. I was like this but worse...for the first bit of ballet school when I was fourteen to sixteen, I really wasn't happy there...I was probably in tears for most of the journey going. When I think about the reason that I'm umm talking about this is that my poor Mum, she must have been heartbroken having to leave me...I mean I know I was older, I mean Kieran's only six...but still...you know...You still hurt when they hurt. (81-274)

### ***Maintaining the role of one's own parents***

The underlying influence to emerge for this theme is reminiscent of Bandura's (1977) social learning theory in the context of whether or not the mothers decide to adopt their parents' technique of raising them, is contingent on their own memories of childhood. In other words the mothers, sometimes unconsciously, assess their parents as potential role models determining which behaviours they wish to emulate, and which they would rather adapt or discard.

For example, Rebecca's high regard for her late mother is evident several times during the interview and thus, it is not surprising that she has become a positive role model for her:

R: I had a very very umm wonderful relationship with my Mum anyway and I think it just umm solidifies everything and umm you know sometimes I think oh how would...there's a lot of moments I think how would you deal with this Mum? And am I doing okay Mum? You know...those sorts of questions and thoughts really. Umm 'cause she was a fantastic mother and you know the struggles that at times I've had with Zach I thought oh God would she have handled it like that, you know, what would she think about it? (103-264)

As Rebecca questions herself and tries to model her own behaviour on her mother's, it becomes apparent that this may be her coping strategy and her way of keeping her mother's memory alive. This is tangible again when she compares her own parents against her in-laws and aspires to teach her son about his absent grandparents:

R: ...you know, being totally honest they are very different people to my parents. I know that that would have been a different relationship again but umm you know they think the world of Zach, but it's not that sort of just drop in relationship, come in and play... (102-223). I talk to Zach a lot about his other grandparents, my Mum and Dad. (103-257)

In contrast, Lucy speaks candidly about her efforts to avoid a repeat performance of her parents' life, though in this instance she is referring more to their general lifestyle than parenting, the overriding inference is still evident:

L: I was adamant I wasn't going to be like my Mum and Dad I think was a lot of it. That I didn't want to go down the same path as them...I mean definitely separating when I still had young kids I felt like I'd changed the pattern just because you know my Mum and Dad had never been happy together but just stayed together for the kids and John and I had said that we'd never do that because his parents had done the same as well. (97-379)

A more specific example can be extracted from her portrayal of her father's current relationship with her children:

L: ...my Dad was the same as my Mum to me and my brother umm I mean you know when Anna came along he was yeah wanting to see her and stuff but never really interacted with her or...I knew he loved her but he didn't know how to show it I guess or what to do because I think he just felt awkward. (95-251)

In Fran's situation the intimation is one of a positive role model for her own parents but, similarly to Rebecca, a negative one for her in-laws. The inclusion of her husband's opinion indicates a perceived unanimity in their parental style:

F: Umm my in-laws have surprised me, they've gone the opposite way, and I didn't expect that. They've been very distant, so it's you know, it's been quite an eye opener it's kind of made.....I think it also makes you realise at a different level who you can trust, who you can't, who you want the children to be with. I want them to grow up with the same families that my parents are showing them now and I'm showing them, not with the families of...I hate saying this but...my husband's family where it's all about convenience...or of...if you've got the time, you know, it's all about they put themselves first rather than other people and I don't think the boys have that kind of upbringing you know...I think Mike looks at his life and thinks these have been my parents who wouldn't do this or that and I don't want to do that for my children. (87-142)

### **Personal self –impact of initial transition**

The impact of the initial transition to motherhood involved a redefinition of the women's self-concept and identity. This initial adaption engendered many abrupt changes - changes to their daily routine, their sleep pattern, their friendships, relationships with their partners and family, and the primary focus to emerge; their perception of themselves. All of the women recognised that becoming a mother had had major consequences for their physical, mental, and emotional selves, and in some form acknowledged the precedent that, 'it's the most life changing thing of course you could do'. Their personal journeys were essentially unique and varied, and resulted in two subthemes emerging; loss of physical self and identity, and preserving the self and a desire to escape.

#### ***Loss of physical self and identity***

This subtheme was inspired by the fact that three of the women had led successful careers as professional dancers and the loss to their physical identity was, not surprisingly, a particularly salient one. This was certainly the case for two of the women, Chloe and Lucy; however when these revelations are compared to the third, Rebecca, it becomes apparent that she makes little reference to her previous career. This may reveal her previous sense of inadequacy and low self-esteem whilst fulfilling that role, which she reflects on towards the latter part of her interview. However, both Lucy and Chloe are quite lucid in their accounts:

C: The only thing that I sometimes think with regard to self identity is that and this sounds awful but part of me sort of looks back to our glamorous days and I look at myself now (laughs) and just... (laughs) (82-320)...I mean I don't wear heels anymore, I used to wear heels all of the time. I barely walk in them now and so the self identity thing...I mean, I do this work at the school, I'm setting up the kids' food which is sweet and I don't mind it and they're lovely but there's element of me



sometimes, just between you and me and this tape recorder (laughs) that I just think here I am with me blimin' tabard on, me red school tabard chopping up, umm you know, baked potato for the kids and I used to be on stage (laughs). I used to have false lashes on and dance in fabulous outfits. (83-370)...it's not like this is my life long career, so it's not like I'm having to think of it like as something permanent, but still there are times when I self-identity wise, when I sort of look back to the glamorous life that we led and now I sort of wear slippers most of the time (laughs). (83-393)

Several abbreviated quotations of Chloe's have been used in the example above, to try and portray the extent of her constant self-comparisons with her previous self. The enormity of her change of role identity; from a glamorous ballet dancer performing worldwide, to the role of kitchen assistant in her local school is certainly a salient and deep-rooted topic for her. Nevertheless, the interjections of her self-deprecating humour at this point and throughout her interview, and her ability to see the irony in her situation, help create an atmosphere of underlying contentment and fulfilment. Having said that, she clearly has times of conflict; for example, her reference to her current situation as one of not being 'permanent' suggests a coping strategy to deal with her moments of low self-esteem and self-doubt.

In contrast, when questioned about a potential change to her identity, Lucy's feelings of loss to her former self are portrayed much more poignantly:

L: Oh lost it completely. Well I guess because before I'd been umm in this box of being this dancer, who was umm sexy and outgoing and attractive and, you know, quite...just got on and did things, to suddenly being at the mercy of somebody else feeling really dowdy, unattractive, not any more being a dancer, which was something that, you know, I did since I was two and it was all I knew and suddenly I wasn't doing it anymore. Just wondering what my purpose was really, even though I knew my purpose was a mother at the time, I never really felt like that wasn't, you know, that wasn't enough for me. Even though I knew it was what I had to do, I knew it wasn't something that I wanted to be forever and that was it. It was kind of a job that I just saw I had to do at that time, until she was old enough that I didn't have to be around as much, but I was always thinking okay what am I gonna be? What am I gonna do? So I guess I never really focused on it a 100 percent, being a mother, and maybe did as much as I could. (95-265)

For Lucy, her personal identity and dancer identity were clearly synonymous and thus, to lose the latter left her with a void; a feeling of not knowing 'who' she was or what her purpose was in life. This is further exacerbated by her 'resentment' in embracing her maternal self, as she expresses almost a feeling of entrapment and desire to escape. There are signs of a conflict in her feelings though, as she later describes the bond she evidently felt with her daughter, a 'mini-me', and the later regret of not having been a more hands-on mother:

L: ...Of not being a more proactive mother and being more baking cakes and getting involved in local whatever with other kids and you know going out to NCT meetings or whatever it is, you know, I didn't do that. (96-335)

### ***Preserving self – desire to escape***

The desire to escape, on a similar level to Lucy, was intimated by a couple of mothers. The context of preserving the self reflects the paradoxical effect motherhood engendered for them; one of maternal pride and unconditional love, contrasting with a negative self-efficacy and inability to cope.

Lucy's sentiments are expressed in the previous section, but although essentially idiosyncratic, a comparable outlook is reflected by both Rebecca and Amy:

A: First time around actually I wanted to go back to work because I couldn't cope with Ella umm the way she was and how I felt and I kind of needed to have something outside of motherhood. Although I think it was probably more of an escape from her; I mean actually I know it sounds a little bit funny, but I remember being a bit frightened of Ella. Umm like when she cried out in the night I would doubt my ability to calm her and nurture her and you know get her back to sleep and she kind of seemed like this endlessly umm uncontrollable thing that just seemed to be controlling me all of the time...(70-94)

Amy's feelings of inability to control her daughter and the fear she expresses mirror the time of self-doubt she was clearly experiencing. A similar negative self-efficacy is conveyed by Rebecca in her desire to 'cocoon' herself from the external world:

R: I think because Zach was always quite...he was never just straightforward he was always difficult, quite complicated people used to say (laughs). And umm so I was always very umm sensitive to how he was behaving probably too much so and that's one of my fortunate traits you know that seems to be too worried about what other people are thinking and umm so I didn't relax totally into umm being around mums all the time. I would sometimes just come back and you know stay here for a few days and then venture out again and try again and then you know what I mean? I can remember that was very much the journey in the early days...whether that was a post natal thing going on I don't know or it was just how, you know, how I could handle it was sort of cocooning myself up to a point and then keep on venturing out and trying again...(-294)

### **Personal self - striving for a new sense of identity**

This master theme emerged from the mothers' acceptance and immersion of motherhood; one that occurred after they learnt to acclimatise to their new roles and rediscover their sense of self, purpose, and direction. It constitutes a reflection of their inner journeys, as the women typically turn inwards and endeavour towards unconditional self-acceptance, as opposed to conditional self-worth and as such, allow themselves to be able to enjoy motherhood with minimal levels of self-doubt, fear, and stress.

#### ***Regaining control and sense of self***

This time of self-reflection and striving to regain their sense of self and autonomy is inferred by Fran:

F: But what I've learnt is that over the last couple of years is to kind of create...create a life within motherhood of my own, so umm I start to do little things to make me feel like I exist as an individual, rather than as a slave to the children and to the family...(86-75)

On the topic of re-evaluating the previously over-achieving and ambitious side of self, she retorts:

F: Do you know what? It's been such a long time that I haven't been very good at flaunting the doctor bit. I think of it as a career break. Yeah I'm a great believer in you can umm you can you know make opportunities from the situation that you're in, so

I'm still thinking is this a time for me to change career, start from scratch, use my skills that I've gained or go back? I'm keeping very open minded about it and if I still want to go back then at least then I know that it's really what I want to do, so umm yeah I'm quite relaxed about things. (89-204)

As the interview progresses and Lucy starts to relate more recent periods, she noticeably becomes more reflective and less critical about her stages of motherhood as she tries to make sense of her experiences:

L: ...I obviously did lose myself as a person, but I do remember being quite adamant in the beginning that I wasn't going to. I didn't want to lose who I was, but then I guess I saw me as a dancer and couldn't see me as anything else. (97-406)...I didn't do as much as I wanted to and I guess that's got a lot to do with how I feel towards John because he came along when I was feeling I was at my best really and gave it up for him, which was my choice obviously, he didn't ask me to... (98-416)

In sharp contrast, Chloe gives the impression of being saved by her new maternal identity; in the following extract she recollects her feelings prior to the arrival of her first child:

C: I never knew what to do with myself really; I didn't even know what else to replace it with. I kept saying to myself, I thought I've got to find myself a career. I didn't know what else I wanted to do. I didn't particularly want to do anything else. (78-110)

The contrast of Lucy and Chloe's extracts signifies the effect timing can have on the decision to start a family; Lucy clearly feels her career was interrupted by the decision to settle down and plan towards a family, whereas Chloe feels sated by her previous career and anxious at the thought of not knowing how to replace it. This is reverberated in the next extract:

C: ...plus point in starting late is that if you're lucky like us and have travelled and done a job that we love and everything then, you know, as much as you can miss it when you go into the next major phase such as having kids, you can sort of do it with a certain amount of contentment; you haven't got itchy feet... (79-123)

### ***A time of self-realisation & self-actualisation***

This final subtheme emerged from the women reflecting back on their journeys. The following extracts are not answers to a specific question, but spontaneous moments towards the end of the interview as, in their idiosyncratic ways, they evaluate how much they have achieved and 'travelled'.

R: ...for my confidence it's been a real boost because suddenly I've realised hey I've done this all by myself, you know, all the way through I've been really the sole carer for Zach and I think for me personally that has been a real confidence boost. Umm so I look at it on both angles and I think it's been incredibly, you know, the best thing that could have ever happened for me and I think I've grown in confidence because of it. (101-160). You know often people sort of lose their own identity umm who they were before but for me it's actually...it's actually enhanced...yeah...it's interesting... (102-200)

A: I feel fulfilled, actually I feel completely fulfilled, umm I feel like this is actually I know it sounds a bit weird but this is actually what I was meant to do; that's what I

was put on this planet to do, to bring these two up umm and I never would have, if you'd asked me that ten years ago, I never would have said that. (75-310)

F: I've worked all my life to be a scientist and now I'm stuck at home changing nappies [laughs] and it's the best thing ever [laughs]. I don't feel a loss when I look at the boys... (90-266)

C: ...I wouldn't go back now for all the tea in China; I'm so happy now with my little family. I suppose my family has almost been my replacement.(78-104)...if you can do this, then you can do anything, because it's a tough thing. (84-426)...I'm in with my baby and it's exactly where I want to be... (79-129).

Lucy's journey has certainly been different to the other four; she is the only one now separated and the only one who, at the time of writing, had returned to a full time career. However, in her individualistic way, she is finding her own path and sense of self-realisation:

L: I do think my job is 60 percent teacher and 40 percent dancer; that I've got my identity back, because I'm in those classes dancing full out and still dancing 6 days a week which I shouldn't be; I should be stood there teaching but I just can't help myself because, you know, I didn't get it out my system I guess. (98-412)

## **DISCUSSION**

This study focused on five women, who had all led successful careers, reflecting on their experiences of the transitional first few years of motherhood. The aim was to capture the process of identity change, role adaption, and interpersonal challenges engendered by the journey through motherhood, by comparing and contrasting the women's individual accounts. The findings revealed highly individualistic transitions, as the women readjusted to their maternal role with a varying range of trepidation, post-natal trauma, self-doubt, interpersonal conflict, and a loss to their previous identities; this was coupled with a profound sense of achievement and self-worth. Five master themes emerged from the analysis, touching on constructs described by previous researchers in relation to the effects of motherhood, as per the ensuing discussion.

The first theme to emerge encompassed the women's marital relationships and the subsequent adaption, compromise, and unity bestowed by their new parental roles. All five women reported having to renegotiate the balance in their marriage, as their roles become more traditional and they assumed the main responsibility for childcare. To a certain extent, these findings appear to support Ruble et al.'s (1988) research mentioned in the introduction, as the women's marriages did become less egalitarian; however for the women concerned, none of them attributed their marital distress to an unforeseen increase in household duties or childcare. Any interpersonal problems the women experienced seem to evolve from spending less time alone with their husbands, a disappointment in their husband's paternal bond or financial contribution, and the subsequent loss of their own financial independence.

Nevertheless, comparable to Hackel and Ruble's (1992) study cited in the introduction, there did appear to be an association between how well the women adjusted to their new traditional roles of being a full-time mother, their self-identity, and their partnerships. To elaborate, the women with salient occupational sub-identities (for example, Lucy) felt a loss for their previous status, were more prone to depression, and were more dissatisfied in their marital relationships. In contrast the women who strongly identified with their maternal role (for example, Chloe) appeared to suffer the least marital disruption. However, it is impossible to intimate any sort of causal effect, such as Hackel and Ruble (1992) purported, without comparing the quality of the relationships prior to the arrival of the first baby, with any subsequent manifestations.

Overall, these results highlight the pivotal transition and changing dynamics that affect most marriages following the birth of a child. As Cowan and Cowan (1995) assert, there has been a plethora of research purporting a positive or negative effect on the relationship following the transition to parenthood, but further investigation is needed into what marks the difference between couples who adjust well and those who experience marital distress. More recently there has been an interest in the success of couple intervention programs aimed at enhancing the parents' coping skills and awareness, in addition to reducing their stress levels (e.g. Glade, Bean, & Vira, 2005; Schulz, Cowan, & Cowan, 2006). As the findings from this study imply, even in relationships that appear to adjust to parenthood with apparent ease, there are still compromises and role changes to negotiate and thus, intervention programs and a greater awareness within the psychological field can only prove advantageous, for what can transpire to be a challenging period for a great many new parents. As Glade et al. (2005) emphasise, the marital dyad is particularly important following the birth of a child, as it provides the environment for the infant's attachment and socialisation development, where they will learn and be nurtured.

A second salient theme to evolve from the data involved the women's own concept of motherhood, a 'self-constructed motherhood'; this was noted to alter and change as the women's experiences deviated from their preconceived ideas and desires. The topic of an idealised motherhood emerged spontaneously from the interviews and reflects the phenomenological results engendered by this style of research. To elaborate, a question specific to their values and desires for motherhood was not part of the original interview schedule and yet, this was clearly an important issue for the women and as such, surfaced in varying degrees for all of them. Most notably, by the time the first child arrived it became apparent that the mothers had built 'visions' of an idealised motherhood in their minds, which subsequently often failed to match with their realities.

This maternal expectancy has, however, been noted in other research; for example, a study by Harwood, McLean, and Durkin (2007) found poorer relationship adjustment and an increased tendency for depression, when experiences following childbirth were negative in comparison to expectation during pregnancy. This concept is analogous to the marital research mentioned in the introduction (Hackel & Ruble, 1992); when women over-estimate the amount of assistance they will receive from their husbands, a significant decline in marital satisfaction has been found. Similarly, disconfirmed expectations about motherhood in general have been

associated with a more difficult transition for the first few months (Harwood et al, 2007).

However, a discrepancy between expectation and experience may not be the only influence on the participants' mood; for example, two of the women in the study endured a traumatic birth experience and a perception of being out of control during labour, both of which have been consistently linked to postnatal depression (Oakley, Rajan & Grant, 1990). Furthermore, women's overall sense of satisfaction with the birth experience has been shown to affect their subsequent emotional well-being (Green & Baston, 2003). Comparably, a recent study by Lemola, Stadlmayr, and Grob (2007) found that a poor psychological adjustment can be evoked by an adverse childbirth experience.

To further exacerbate their situation, both of these women then reported difficulties in breastfeeding their infants and either complained of a lack of social support, or intimated at a less than supportive husband. In a similar vein, Lemola et al. (2007) found that the emotional support of a partner in the postnatal months acted as a moderator in the prevention of depression and intrusive thoughts. The importance of social and family supports for the ease of the mother's role adjustment has previously been expressed in the introduction (Florsheim et al., 2003). The implication from these findings is that women with a negative childbirth experience and poor emotional support from their partners are at an increased risk from psychological maladjustment in the postpartum period. Improved antenatal awareness and education for both mother and partner may help ameliorate these tendencies.

The other salient concept to emerge within this theme was the prevalence of the women to socially compare themselves, either negatively or positively, with other mothers. The need to affiliate in potentially stressful situations has been found consistently in the psychological literature, demonstrating that individuals seek others in similar situations to their own for emotional support, or guidance regarding their own behaviour (Suls & Wheeler, 2000). Nevertheless, there is a current paucity of research looking specifically at the direct and indirect interaction of new mothers and the subsequent effects of a positive or negative self-comparison. Other mothers act as potential role models through whom individuals gauge their own accomplishments and as such, the implication from this finding is that this study has only insinuated at what may be a discrete variable for many new mothers in their transitional stages of parenthood. The effect of social comparison on an individual's maternal self-efficacy is certainly an area worth reviewing for future research.

This finding can be compared, however, to similar results reported in the study by Barlow and Cairns (1997) mentioned in the introduction. Although Barlow and Cairns do not directly refer to a theory of social comparison, they purport a process of 'self-socialization' (p.238), in which the mothers in their study develop and adapt their parenting skills by assessing suitable role models. The 'role models' in the context of Barlow and Cairn's study are not necessarily other mothers though and often encompass the participants' own family. The assessment of one's own parents as potential role figures formed part of the third theme in the preceding analysis in this study, as the women chose to emulate or reject their own parental models. Analogous to Barlow and Cairn's findings, the women in this study who

believed they had experienced negative parenting as a child appeared to engage in self-monitoring strategies, in order to successfully change their own parental skills.

The concepts of self-monitoring and self-socialisation, though not specifically elucidated as one of the main themes in this study, emerged consistently through the analysis and effectively influenced the themes that did transpire; for example the 'self-constructed motherhood' theme. The self-socialisation perspective suggests the importance of information-seeking both in anticipation of and during a major life transition as part of the self-definitional process; as per Deutsch et al.'s (1988) study mentioned in the introduction. In this context some of the women actively sought information either from indirect sources such as books, by social comparison as previously mentioned, or by direct experience with their new babies. Deutsch et al.'s referral to this active information-seeking as a 'coping strategy' can be witnessed at several points in the current study, as the women seem to take refuge in either comparing their situation to others, consulting external sources such as baby groups or books, or reflecting at an intrapersonal level.

Another finding from Deutsch et al.'s (1988) study was that the mothers with easy babies considered themselves to be better mothers than the mothers who had difficult babies. In a similar vein, the findings reported here reveal that the mothers who had babies with easy dispositions and fed well appeared to be more confident and less critical of their efficaciousness. This result can be found quite extensively in the psychological literature; for example, Cutrona and Troutman (1986) found that infant temperament was negatively associated with maternal self-efficacy.

To return to the third theme of the current study, 'ghosts of own childhood'; as well as emphasising an assessment of their own parents' childrearing skills, the results highlight the changing dynamics that being a daughter can entail following the transition to motherhood. In general, the women became more empathetic to the conditions experienced by their own mothers; this increased empathic understanding of one's own parents, particularly the mother, has been consistently reported in the psychological literature as the experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, and raising a child are shared (Rossan, 1987). However, the subsequent changes engendered to their own feelings of autonomy were more idiosyncratic and complex. To elaborate, some of the women appeared to become more independent of their parents as their sense of competence and confidence increased; in contrast, for others becoming a mother necessitated more dependence on their parents for advice, reassurance, and help with the child care. Becoming a mother clearly changes the dynamics of the emotional bond between parent and child and has only been hinted at within the parameters of this study; nevertheless it emerged as a salient area for all of the women and as such, is worthy of future review. For example, an acknowledgment and awareness that becoming a mother can elicit unresolved issues from one's own parental relationship may help in the development of understanding and forgiveness.

The final, though no less salient, two themes to emerge from the analysis portray the changing dynamics to the personal self through the first few years of motherhood. The results paint a portrait of motherhood that is both variable and diverse and essentially individualistic. Nevertheless, all of the women described or alluded to a loss of their previous selves, for some this manifested as a loss to their financial independence and career identity, and for others the most profound loss

was felt by their physical identity. The extent of this loss also varied dramatically between the women; for some the loss of self was holistic as they mourned their physical, personal, and occupational identities. For others, adapting to a changed postnatal physique was counterbalanced, or at least ameliorated, by a sense of pride by what their maternal bodies had achieved.

This latter adaptation mirrors Clark et al.'s (2009) findings, mentioned in the introduction, of the psychological adjustments mother's construct for their changing bodies during the postpartum period. Perhaps, not surprisingly, the two mothers who spoke negatively about their postnatal bodies were two of the ex-professional dancers and as such, the perceived loss to their former physical selves was particularly evident. However, the interview schedule did not include a specific question relating to body image or shape and as such, it is impossible to conjecture how the other women felt about their physical identities following childbirth. Considering the ubiquitous discontent with shape and weight among women in society, it would be advantageous for future studies to encompass an understanding of how women respond and adjust to the multitude of changes in eating, weight, and shape during pregnancy and the postpartum period. More recently there has been an increase in studies carried out specifically looking at eating habits and body image during pregnancy and following childbirth (e.g. Clark et al, 2009; Patel, Lee, Wheatcroft, Barnes, & Stein, 2005); however, most of this research has been carried out in isolation. Ideally future research will consider the women's self-esteem regarding her physical self, alongside the broader perspective of identity change, interpersonal conflict, and maternal self-efficacy.

The associated loss to the women's other identities, such as personal, social, and occupational, were related to their mixed and complex emotions as they sought to accept their maternal identity. For some of the mothers the desire to escape from their newly acquired role was particularly overwhelming, although this was mostly evident in the mothers who reported difficulties with their infant's temperament as previously mentioned, or for those mothers who felt that they possessed a weak maternal instinct, reminiscent of Hackel & Ruble's (1992) findings mentioned previously. Nevertheless, the issue of emotional support could be particularly relevant for the women who experienced difficulties. For example, a number of studies have posited the benefits of social support during the postpartum months to help negate the feeling of an inability to cope and a negative self-efficacy (Goldstein, Diener, & Mangelsdorf, 1996). The results reported here found that the women who struggled to adapt and purported a negative self-concept were either unable to drive, isolated themselves, or experienced marital distress. Comparably, findings from Goldstein et al.'s study contended that women who had larger support networks and who were satisfied with the support received from their partner, were less stressed and more sensitive to the needs of their infants. In a similar context, Smith's (1999b) research mentioned earlier, highlights the importance of social contact with significant others to facilitate a secure sense of personal identity and self-concept.

In general, though the negative aspects may have emerged as being more salient for the women, their experiences do reflect the contradictory feelings the journey to motherhood engenders as per the final theme, 'striving for a new sense of identity'. In essence, as well as the loss to their previous identities and feelings of low esteem, the women also expressed the enormous joy and pleasure motherhood



gave them, eliciting a feeling of being needed and wanted, as well as filling them with immense maternal pride. Though there has been a tendency for both medical and psychological research to highlight the pathological effects of motherhood, as asserted in the introduction, there exists a distinct body of literature extolling the positive effects on women's self-worth with regards to the rewards of parenting (Weaver & Ussher, 1997). As Weaver and Ussher affirm, the benefits of motherhood are less tangible than the costs and as such, may not be expressed as easily.

The main implication from these last two themes is their representation of the paradoxical effects of motherhood; in other words, they portray the importance of recognising the interaction between the positive and negative aspects of being a mother. As the results indicate; motherhood is not a unitary experience nor is it a simple one. Accordingly, none of the mothers were either totally positive or totally negative about their experiences and sometimes both aspects would be raised in the same sentence, highlighting the conflict of feelings between self-sacrifice and overwhelming love for their infants.

Overall, the findings generated here contribute little in the way of new insight to the existing literature on the effects of motherhood, though they do compliment themes described in previous qualitative research (e.g. Barlow & Cairns, 1997; Choi, Henshaw, Baker, & Tree, 2005; Weaver & Ussher, 1997). However, this very fact emphasises the importance of these issues to mothers in general and hopefully facilitates towards a greater awareness of what improvements can be made to ease the transition for future mothers and their families. Specifically, more education is needed to reduce the gap between the reality and myth of motherhood, in order to discard the popular media image which only serves to engender feelings of disillusion and inadequacy. Furthermore, a greater awareness is needed, starting with the mothers themselves, of the importance of social support from partners, family, and friends, particularly during adversities such as a negative childbirth experience, or difficulties in the postpartum period.

Strengths of the current study include the use of semi-structured interviews. For example, given the idiosyncratic nature of the transition to motherhood, it was beneficial to allow the women the opportunity to lead the interview into areas of personal significance, in order to gain insight into areas not previously conceived by the research, as well as exploring areas of predetermined interest. This phenomenological approach also had the effect of eliciting naturally occurring repetitions of the same themes across the participants, supporting the trustworthiness of the results, and the internal coherence of the findings in relation to supporting literature. An additional strength was also one of the main limitations; to elaborate the purposive sample of women used for this study was deliberately homogenous in order to allow patterns and commonalities to emerge across the group. Consequently, generalisations from this sample to broader populations, such as adolescent single mothers, should be cautioned.

Another limitation is the retrospective design and reliance on self-report data, which can be vulnerable to faulty recall, respondent bias, and poor articulation. As Smith (1994) encountered in his study, reconstructive accounts enable individuals to employ self-enhancing accounts of the present and to underemphasise past difficulties. Ideally a study such as this should be longitudinal in design, following the

women's experiences through pregnancy, the postpartum period, and once the role of motherhood is well established as per this study. Nevertheless, in defence of this study, it has to be pointed out that longitudinal studies, such as the ones reported by Barlow and Cairns (1997), and Weaver and Ussher (1997), have described similar themes to the ones identified here.

Overall, the current study helps illuminate salient areas of concern and vulnerability for women entering motherhood, as well as emphasising the oft-neglected positive aspects. On a final note, along with the aforementioned suggestions, psychological research may benefit by remembering the male in the parental framework. Considering the importance of a supportive partner and the fact that becoming a parent is often associated with a decline in marital satisfaction, there is a current paucity of systematic exploration of men's feelings and experiences in the postpartum and how they relate to the stereotypes and ideology of fatherhood. As well as continuing to explore the women's experience of motherhood, future research needs to consider the impact of the father's roles as one that is interdependent with the mother and the family unit.

### *Reflexive evaluation*

As a mother and ex-professional dancer myself, it is important to acknowledge that I am in a comparable situation to the participants and consequently, may have unintentionally introduced bias into the analysis. In addition, no other researchers were involved in this project to help minimize any potential bias. However, in defence of these findings; respondent validation was obtained by the participants' approval of their transcripts and analysis, in order to help counterbalance any negative effects.

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