

The Process of Becoming: Maternal Identity in the Transition to Motherhood

Claire Arnold-Baker

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Abstract

The transition to motherhood is a life-changing event. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to examine how mothers experience changes to their sense of self during this transition and how this can be understood from an existential perspective. Drawing on phenomenological research with first-time mothers into the transition to motherhood, it will be argued that changes to maternal identity confirm an existential view of self; that the sense of self is a process of becoming rather than a fixed entity.

Key Words

Maternal identity, self, motherhood, transition, existential dimensions

Introduction to an Existential View of Self

Existential philosophers such as Sartre (1943) and Heidegger (1996) posit that human beings do not have an essential self, a fixed entity that can be defined in terms of a personality or traits. Instead they contend that the self is more dynamic in nature, a process that is only completed when the individual dies. Heidegger believed that human beings were not self-contained units in the world but continually connected beings and he used the term *Being-in-the-world* to capture this essence. In the same way existence is always open to change and to possibilities, then so too is the self. Heidegger believed that it is through our reflections on our interactions with others in the world that we become aware of ourselves, 'I learn about what it means to be human from the very activity of being human' (Zimmerman, 1981: p 29). For Heidegger, this sense of self is intrinsically linked to temporality as how we exist in time determines who we are and how we decide to be. Our past actions and experiences will have an impact on our present, although our present will also influence how we think about our past. In the same way, our past and present experiences will affect how we project ourselves into the future as potentiality. These

Dialectics of Time (van Deurzen and Arnold-Baker, 2018) demonstrate the complex interaction between temporality and our sense of self.

Sartre (1943) takes a similar view to Heidegger when he states that ‘existence precedes essence’. We need to exist first, to experience and to relate to others and the world around us before we can get a sense of ourselves. Sartre believes that fundamentally we are nothingness and we create a sense of ourselves through our experiences and relationships and that through consciousness we distinguish between ‘me’ and ‘not me’. Sartre’s view differs from Heidegger’s in how he sees the connection between self and temporality. He believes that we can only exist in the present as in each moment we transcend our past self. If we are not tied to a past self, then the future is open and full of possibilities. Therefore, as possibility, we project ourselves into a future: we are always becoming but never attain ourselves. Sartre’s view of the self is connected to his ideas on freedom, choice and responsibility. He believed that if we are nothingness then we exist as projection and therefore fundamentally free, as we are not determined by our past experiences or a past sense of ourselves. So we have the freedom to choose and to create and recreate ourselves, although this freedom is not without its limitations and comes with accepting responsibility for our choices.

Both Heidegger and Sartre have similar views on the self; that it is a dynamic process which is created through our interactions with others and the world. Sartre introduced a stronger theme of human agency to his conceptions of self, that we are more active in creating the life that we lead and therefore the person we become, and we can create ourselves anew. Whereas Heidegger sees human *Being* as potential and sees our sense of ourselves connected more to our temporality and, therefore, takes past experiences into account. Both philosophers agree that there will be times when we actively create a life for ourselves which defines us, while at other times our experiences and interactions will impact our sense of self.

Our sense of ourselves often gets challenged in times of crisis or transition. It is during those crisis moments that an individual may re-evaluate themselves and their lives. This often involves a reconsideration of an individual’s beliefs and values and the way in which they want to live their lives. Motherhood is one such transition.

Existential-Phenomenological Research on Motherhood Identity During the Transition to Motherhood

This paper will draw on findings from existential-phenomenological research conducted with eight first-time biological mothers who had babies between six and twelve months of age. The mothers were interviewed on their experience of becoming a mother and van Manen’s (1990) Lived Experience methodology was employed. Eight themes emerged from the analysis but for the purposes of this paper only the theme ‘motherhood

identity' will be explored here. This theme focuses on how the participants felt about becoming mothers. There were four aspects to this theme: *not feeling like a mother*; *adopting a motherhood identity*; *not feeling different*; and *important role*, and each will be examined in turn.

Theme 1: Not Feeling Like a Mother

The first aspect of the motherhood identity theme was 'not feeling like a mother' and it originated from a sense that the mothers' experience did not fit with either their own or the cultural or societal expectations and images of what a 'mother' should be. As Abigail¹ stated she did not feel she had become a very different person but wonders if she should be feeling differently:

'It's one of those things that kind of goes two ways, because it's nice because I do still feel like I'm me, I don't feel like I've become a very different person, through that. But you always have that whole; 'I'm not feeling what I'm supposed to be feeling as mothers' and things like that.'

(pp 49-52)

The mothers interviewed felt the label 'mum' represented a certain quality that they did not possess, whether that was confidence, as Beth describes, she had:

'...connotations of what a mother is, and I don't feel like that... I just think mothers just seem more established, being in control and being authoritative with children and things.'

(p 384, 386-7)

Or overprotectiveness and overemotional, as Christy describes:

'I thought I might change and soften a bit more and be a bit more, I don't know what the word is...motherly! All more kissy kissy, whoo whoo but I don't think I am really.'

(pp 367-378).

Or a sense of being boring, highlighted by Fiona:

'Because I'm not planning on going back to work...but I also don't want to be labelled just 'mum', I don't want to become a boring mum that only talks about their children. So I'm trying to make sure that I keep up to date with current affairs and all that because I don't want to become a boring person or boring wife.'

(pp 160-5)

Georgina on the other hand described how her view of ‘mother’ came from preconceptions that she had growing up:

‘It was really strange for ages when someone said “Ooh what’s it like being a mum?” I felt really awkward with it. “Oh God, I’m a mother”. But it wasn’t anything to do with [Baby Boy], I worship [Baby Boy], it was the preconceptions I had and grew up with in a lot of ways, that I had to adjust to that somehow being a mum wasn’t a weakness, it was actually brilliant. And that was very strange.’

(pp 189-193)

However, for Heather her views came from how mothers were portrayed in the media and how people in general talk about mothers. She felt that the image of a stay-at-home mother was that she was lazy and sat around all day:

‘The stay-at-home mum, as they say, actually it’s not what I am. Even though it’s what I’m supposed to be doing, I’m never in. I’m always out doing something... so yeah, I’m not a stay-at-home mum [laugh]. It means different things to different people but it’s people’s impressions that you’re choosing to be at home and have it easy.’

(pp 326-8, 341-3.)

These seem to be value-laden images which have come from society or other people. Douglas and Michaels (2004) explored how images of mothers and babies have been portrayed in magazines and newspapers over time and how these images allow preconceptions to be formed subconsciously. Although the current study did not explicitly explore this aspect, it was clear that the image of ‘mother’ had a number of negative or paradoxical connotations for the participants which did not match their own views of themselves as mothers.

Feminist authors (Oakley, 1987; Badinter, 1981) have discussed how the myths and images of motherhood have been perpetuated by society. Rossiter warns that often the images of ‘mothers’ that are produced by experts ‘become final statements of how mothers *naturally are*’ (Rossiter, 1988: p 17). Price (1988) also stresses how images of motherhood have been whitewashed and only stress the positive, happy aspects of the experience, leading women to gain a distorted view of the experience. Parker (2005) agrees that how a mother feels about mothering is determined by the culture in which she lives, which will also determine what can and cannot be said about the experiences of mothers (Miller, 2005). Urwin et al’s (2013: p 478) research shows how cultural values and traditions

‘surround’ and ‘influence’ the mother. They concluded that ‘a combination of her own wishes, satisfactions, practices, and outcomes of her own thinking – all accommodating to the reality of *being* a mother – took a new shape in the processes of *becoming* a mother as a psychological trajectory’. Their research highlights the complex negotiations mothers go through as they reassess their cultural ideals and perceptions in light of their current experiences. The mothers in the current study felt that there was such a mismatch between their experience and the images and perceptions they had of motherhood, that it meant they did not feel like a mother. This suggests a need for a new image of ‘mother’ in Western society which more closely matches the experiences new mothers are facing. As Eleanor noted, there are all different kinds of mothers and yet society portrays a particular view of ‘mumsiness’ in her view, that does not apply to many:

‘It still feels weird for me to call myself a mum, and I think ‘mum’ has got this image of mumsiness and being a bit frumpy.’

(pp 121-2)

An element of this theme reflected the gap that opened up when the cultural ideal of ‘mother’ had been rejected by the mothers but it had not been replaced with a new image of the type of mother they were becoming. Kristeva (2002), Miller (2005) and Stadlen (2005) all describe how beginning to feel like a ‘mother’ was a slow process. However, there is an expectation that as soon as a baby is born the mother becomes this new identity: ‘mother’, but it takes a while for the mother to work out what that means to her personally. Miller stresses that ‘the experience of giving birth and being responsible for a child precipitates both an ontological shift and a narrative turning point’ (Miller, 2005: p 110). The current findings showed that it is only over time and through interacting with their baby and doing ‘mothering work’ that the mother will get a sense of herself as mother. This Miller sees as a social rather than an essentialist self. Beth described how it took her a while to grow into feeling like she was a mother and that at first she could not identify with the label ‘mum’:

‘It just took me a while to grow into that name. It was almost like a label that I couldn’t really associate with but having [Baby Girl] to bring up and grow and develop is amazing. I just sort of in a way focus on what’s happening now rather than reflecting on it.’

(pp 391-4)

Beth felt she just focused on what was happening in the moment rather than thinking about her experience and how it affected her sense of herself.

Theme 2: Adopting a Motherhood Identity

The mothers in the current study reported that becoming a mother involved a change in the way they thought about themselves. For Eleanor, it was a stripping back of her identity to nothing when she had her baby and then gradually building it back up again over time:

'So you just get stripped back to nothing where you count for nothing and the only important thing is looking after this baby.'

(p 221-2)

Eleanor went on to talk about how she felt her identity had been made up before the birth and how every aspect had changed for her:

'I was worried my identity would change, because on a logical level, I knew that I wouldn't be at work anymore and up until then you work five days a week, so your job is a large part of your identity and socially, that's another large part of your identity, I knew I wouldn't have that anymore. So there is not a single part of it that isn't changed.'

(pp 266-276)

Beth had a similar experience when she realized before the birth that she would feel very differently about herself and felt that she was saying a farewell to her old way of being before giving birth:

'I was booked to be induced on the Friday morning, so Thursday night I did all my, phoned my mum and sister and it was almost like my farewell as me...definitely felt like a sort of end of a chapter kind of thing.'

(pp 244-6, 376-377)

Georgina also felt that she needed to re-adjust her view of herself:

'It's funny, it just re-adjusts your point of view to yourself, doesn't it?'

(p 198)

Eleanor echoed this and felt the transition took her a while to start to feel like a mum:

'That's quite a big...transition. I think I only now feel like a mum and he's nearly a year old. So it certainly didn't happen overnight'

(pp 79-80)

Heather saw becoming a mother as taking on a new role, in the same way you take on a working role or a role of a wife:

'At the moment, my role in the household is to be the primary carer, I'm the mother. [Husband] is the provider and he has certain jobs that he does, and he expects me to be the primary carer and things and I've taken on that role, it's my job, I've given up my job and this is my full time job at the moment. Yes, that's how I see it.'

(pp 418-421)

For Fiona, on the other hand, it felt as if she was adding a new aspect to her identity:

'Because it is different, you take on a different identity when a child comes into your life. It's a bit like having a working identity and a home identity. I have now got this mother identity as well which is lovely, but I do like getting back to Fiona, just me. It's really nice.'

(pp 102-4)

Research carried out by Lawler and Sinclair (2003), Barclay, et al. (1997) and Weaver and Ussher (1997) have demonstrated how new mothers can experience a loss in their sense of self. Price (1988) highlighted how women lose the way they lived their lives before becoming mothers, which had given them a sense of value but also a sense of themselves as individuals. This loss was experienced by Beth in her quote above but also by Georgina, who describes how much she had given up, how things had changed and how it had taken a while to adjust to this:

'I had given up everything, especially when I was, even though I wanted to give up my job I felt I was giving up my career. I was giving up a lot, everything really, my figure, my career, you know, everything. And you know [husband], his life didn't really change for the negative, his life stayed – changed for the positive. You know, he had the added bit of having the fun part of the baby and that took me a little while to adjust'

(pp 324-8)

Previous literature has suggested that motherhood is a transition time in which the mother reorganizes and transforms her self-identity (Stadlen, 2005; Stern, 1995). Other research has concentrated on how the mother undergoes this transformation and has focused on more ontological issues such as how selves are conceived and changed. One of the mothers in the current research, Eleanor stated how she felt stripped back to nothing and that a sense of self was gradually gained through looking after her baby. From an existential

perspective, this experience is in line with Sartre's (1943) notion that 'existence precedes essence'. The mothers' experience in the current research confirms this, as for some they started from a position of nothingness and through their experience of caring for and looking after their babies they got a sense of what being a mother meant to them.

Other authors have taken a similar position in seeing selves as complex and changing constructs (Miller, 2005). Deutsch, et al. (1988) found that mothers actively construct their identities by seeking out information which helped them form self-concepts. Wetherell's (2009) research showed how mothers developed and created a sense of motherhood out of their experience, their life histories and their relationships. These elements of the self are seen as a process, a continual interchange between the internal and social worlds, rather than an essence that is fixed and complete. Butterfield (2010) posits an existential view of the identity of 'mother'. She states that because of our fundamental freedom we are always more than the identity we possess, so a mother is never essentially just a mother. Butterfield stresses that each individual mother will define what being a mother means to her and how she lives her identity. She believes that being a mother is ambiguous, because mothers are both individual *and* social and both free *and* determined. This means that a motherhood identity is an ongoing process that involves constant negotiation and renegotiation as the mother interacts and gains more experiences. This view of motherhood concurs with the current findings. The participants varied in their experiences but all the mothers felt that the way they felt about themselves had changed. One, Eleanor, felt that every aspect of her identity had changed, whereas some of the other mothers felt they were adding an aspect to themselves, that of mother. All the participants felt that their identity as a mother developed over time and grew out of their interactions and experiences.

Theme 3: Not Feeling Different

This was an unexpected theme to emerge from the findings and is connected to the first sub-theme of *not feeling like a mother*. It is also a paradoxical theme – on the one hand, the mothers reported that they didn't feel any different but still felt like themselves but were now a mother too. As Abigail stated, she didn't feel different but her whole purpose in life and her every waking thought was now about her baby:

'Hard to explain it, that it's that sense that I don't feel that different...but [Baby Boy], that being the main thought of my life. It's not that I'm thinking on a day-to-day basis but if I sit and think about it, well he is. So maybe that is more there than I realised.'

(pp 263-5)

On the other hand, once they started to explore this idea further, the mothers realized how different their lives had become and how it had also affected how they thought about themselves. This paradoxical situation suggests that the mothers were still grappling with incorporating the identities and roles they had into something meaningful for themselves. Christy expressed the paradox that on the one hand she felt she had not changed and was not more emotional, and on the other hand noticing that she was doing things that she hadn't done before, like crying:

“‘She’s a mum now, she might change”, but I don’t think they think I’ve changed and I don’t think I have, saying that now and I’m crying.’

(pp 315-6)

Whereas Fiona recognized that once her baby slept in the evening, she found herself feeling like she had done before she had had the baby. She even went so far as to say she could ‘switch off the mum’, before correcting herself and realizing that she could never ‘switch off the mum’:

‘I still think I’m me. I can easily switch off the mum – well I don’t ever switch off being a mum. But you know when he’s in bed and we sit and have dinner and watch TV or whatever, it’s as if he’s not here which is lovely, really lovely. I was hoping it would be like that. So that hasn’t changed.’

(pp 299-302)

The findings suggested that the participants experienced motherhood as another aspect of themselves, although these new motherhood experiences had not been incorporated or made sense of in those early weeks and months. Heather described it above, as taking on a different identity; you have a working identity, a home identity and now a mother identity. This was echoed by Abigail who was almost surprised that she didn't feel more different after having a baby:

‘I don’t feel quite as different as you think that you might do. But people say that you just feel like they’re a mother and they aren’t, they lose some of themselves I don’t think I feel that so much. I think more so because it’s like ‘Ooh, it is me and I am being a mother’, it kind of surprises me still, in some ways.’

(pp 43-6)

This suggests that at different times different aspects of being a mother come to the fore. The ‘not feeling different’ theme that emerged from the findings suggested that rather than the mothers creating an entirely new

identity for themselves, they were adapting their identity or adding an aspect to it to incorporate their new experiences. This finding is similar to Smith's (1994) proposed explanation: that because mothers undergo a time of extreme upheaval, they felt a psychological need to create a sense of order by emphasizing how much they remained constant despite the huge change. His research also suggested mothers construct a number of narratives, which are sometimes contradictory and that through a process of retrospection and reconstruction a new identity is developed. The current findings also supported research conducted by Bailey (1999) who found that women did not undergo a complete change in themselves; rather the transition to motherhood was a pivot point for them to renew their personal narrative. Therefore, the research conducted by Smith and Bailey showed that motherhood is a time when women renew the narratives they construct of themselves and this renewal is a complex process which requires retrospection. The current findings have also demonstrated that because of the all-consuming nature of motherhood (Arnold-Baker, 2015), there is little time for retrospection and self-reflection and therefore it takes time for the mother to make sense of what being a mother means to her and how this will affect her sense of herself.

Theme 4: Important Role

This finding relates to the value and importance the participants placed on their role in bringing up a baby who will be part of society and the next generation. While the mothers interviewed felt at odds with the way in which mothers were portrayed or thought about in society, they did acknowledge that theirs was an important and worthwhile job:

'I have this very special job, I get to raise this child and I have lots of input because choosing to stay at home I am the primary carer in terms of shaping this little boy and becoming this, what my values and things, and hoping to instil in him, he will share those values.'

(Heather: p 296-8)

This finding concurs with Laney et al's (2014) research that motherhood extends mothers into future generations and the differences and influences they make will outlive their physical existence. The current findings also agree with Stadlen's (2005) view that society depends on how the mother relates to her child and that socialization is the aspect of a mother's work that is often overlooked. This echoes Rossiter's view that:

'The first assumption was that something could be found in nothing – since apparently mothering was made up of doing nothing...yet I knew that all of that Nothingness was in fact

everything: that is, the reproduction of the next generation, physically and emotionally.'

(1988: p 19)

The mothers in the current study were aware of their place in the generations and how they will be carried forward in their children. Abigail realized that being a mother was not just about bringing up and looking after a baby; it was a bigger and more important job which affected the society we live in and the future generations:

'Having talked about living presently, what it is, is more kind of what the future is, the kind of ongoing generations and that you are, there's something of you that's carrying on and that you're bringing somebody else into society, hopefully to be a nice person and do constructive things in their life and being part of that.'

(pp 116-120)

Beauvoir (1997) also talked about the 'great cycle of the species', where the mother moves along the life cycle with the birth of her child. This awareness of moving along the life cycle also brings an awareness of the mother's mortality. The importance and value of this aspect of mothering was also demonstrated by Christy, who was quite emotional when talking about it. She realized the privilege she felt at being influential in her child's life but also understanding the enormity of what being a mother entailed; being able to influence and teach her baby was an important job but also one of great responsibility:

'I just feel really lucky to be able to, well already give [Baby Girl] all these influences in life and teach her things. I don't know it's quite emotional to think about it [laughter and tears]... I don't know I can't think succinctly about what it actually means, I find it hard to describe what it means. I haven't really thought about it. It's an important job!' [laughter]

(pp 277-9, 290-2)

The mothers in this current study were acknowledging the enormity and importance of the role of being a mother, but also their responsibility. They had responsibility not only over their own lives but also over the lives of their children. This was a valuable aspect of being a mother which affected the meaning and purpose of their lives (Arnold-Baker, 2015).

Existential Analysis of the Motherhood Identity Theme

When analyzing the Motherhood Identity theme from the four worlds perspective (van Deurzen, 1988) it lies in three dimensions; the *Eigenwelt*

or personal dimension, the *Mitwelt* or social dimension and the *Überwelt* or spiritual dimension. The personal dimension concerns the individual's personal world, how they view themselves and their sense of identity, but it also contains an individual's emotional or psychological worlds too. The findings show that mothers develop their motherhood identity over time and their initial thoughts about the type of mother they will be are often rejected when they are faced with the reality of their experience. Here the mother grapples with expectations from society and others in the social dimension as she tries to find her own way of being a mother in the personal dimension. The mothers' initial feelings are that they don't feel like a mother and that they haven't changed, yet when they reflect on themselves and their experiences, they realize that their thoughts and actions are all directed towards and focused on their babies; their world has become that of their babies. As the new mother immerses herself in the tasks of mothering, working out how to look after and relate to her baby, there is little time for self-reflection. Therefore, the mother does not have a sense of what being a mother means to her or how she is incorporating 'mother' into her identity in those early months. Through the process of *doing*, the woman gets a sense of whom and how she is a mother. Rather than losing her identity the mother is gaining an extra aspect to herself, but she is also in a process of re-evaluating her life, her beliefs, values, purpose and meaning in light of her new position in the world, and this forms part of the spiritual dimension. The development of a maternal identity therefore involves a complex interaction between all three dimensions, the social, personal and spiritual.

Conclusion: Confirming an Existential View of Self

It has been shown that motherhood involves a dramatic change in a woman's life, which inevitably has an impact on her identity. Previous research on the topic has confirmed that identity is actively and creatively made (Wetherell, 2009) and that it is always a process (Hollway, 2010) which would confirm an existential view of self. Mead's (1934) proposal of a reflexive model of the person, in which the view of self could be modified and came out of social interaction is in line with Blumenthal's (1999) research that our identity is co-created through our collaboration with others. This confirms Heidegger's (1996) notion that we are *Being-in-the-world* and constantly in relation with others and these relationships determine how we think about ourselves.

Previous motherhood research has also demonstrated that there is a temporal aspect to the dynamic and complex process of identity transformation. Our sense of identity changes over time and reflects our relationships with the world and other people. MacIntyre (1981), Carr (1986) and Ricoeur (1992) use the term *narrative identity* to encompass our personal past, present and

future into a meaningful coherence. They believe we are immersed in a narrative about our lives and are in a process of recounting and reassessing the meaning of those narratives. This concurs with Heidegger's (1996) view that we do not live our temporality in a linear way but instead carry our past with us into the present and project ourselves forwards into the future.

In terms of the current research, it was interesting that most of the participants did not talk about their birth or infant feeding experiences. Instead their focus was on making sense of their motherhood experiences and of what being a mother meant to them. This highlighted the temporal aspect of identity in terms of the mothers' narratives. Twelve months after the birth, the mothers' preoccupations had gradually moved from narratives about the birth and infant feeding to narratives about their sense of themselves as a mother. Although the previous narratives will still form a part of the mothers' overall identity and experience, there had been a gradual shift in their focus as their experiences changed.

Initially, the mothers in the current study found that their preconceived ideas and images of 'mother' did not match up to their experience. Some of the mothers described the process as a stripping back of their identity. The participants did not feel any different at first, yet their life had changed immeasurably in how they lived and the responsibility they had for their babies. Over time they began to make sense of what being a mother meant to them personally. This occurred through their experience of relating to their babies and to others and the wider world, and they began to gain a feeling of what being a 'mum' meant to them. The findings of the current study concurred with previous research on maternal identity and have confirmed an existential view of self; that as our experiences and relationships change, we change with them and this happens over time: we are a process of becoming. The findings also showed that this process involves a complex interaction between all dimensions of existence.

Dr. Claire Arnold-Baker is a counselling psychologist and an existential therapist and supervisor. She is Academic Manager at NSPC and Programme Leader for their DCPsych programme, a joint programme with Middlesex University. Claire has a small private practice where she specializes in working with mothers.

Contact: claire@nspc.org.uk

Notes

1. All names have been changed to protect anonymity.

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