

## Revisiting Motherhood: A Psycho-social Probe Exploring the Changing Trends in the Attitudes and Perspectives of Educated Women

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Mothers, motherhood and mothering long have been the subject of academic research, public discussion and debate. The changing times, the revolution and evolution of the woman's role in society have produced subsequent modifications in the normative prescriptions and expectations in the perception of motherhood. This study used a cross-sectional qualitative research method used on adult mothers to investigate their experiences of motherhood, to hear what they had to say about their attitudes, values, concerns and needs. It also aimed to gather quantitative data on 'motherhood' from female college students to investigate the perceptions and opinions regarding their own future mothering role. Data was collected through 40 individual interviews involving a semi-structured set of open-ended questions rated by three experts. Analysis of the interviews was conducted using a qualitative content analysis approach. Also, the perception of 70 female college students ranging from 18 – 24 years about their own future mothering role was taken. Results showed significant differences in a considerable portion of the study between the group of mothers interviewed and the college students. Also, important attitudinal differences between the two groups are revealed. Additionally, inconsistent with prior research, mothers have shown variations in their perception of motherhood with varying age of their motherhood experience. .

**Keywords:** Motherhood, perception, conflict and role.

The recent times have witnessed dramatic transitions in the woman's role in the human society. The massive rise in the level of education a woman receives nowadays, together with the other simultaneous improvements in the woman's current socio-politico-economical position, particularly in the urbanized set-up, have introduced powerful role revisions for the woman. Therefore, consequent modifications in the normative social time-table and prescriptions for the woman have begun to demand increasing research attention.

A crucial normative socio-cultural expectation from the woman is the attainment of motherhood, and the dedicated nurturance of her offspring(s). However, the gradual shifts in the familial role of the woman has also created scope for newer perspectives and attitudes to emerge in her about the predominant expectations in the society. Moreover, it would be justified to assume that the expansions in the role of the woman outside the immediate boundaries of the

home, would create obvious hindrances in her duties of child-rearing and caring for the family as a whole. Such increasing complexities and challenges of functioning are of high likelihood to alter perceptions, and attitudes of the early adult women who have to opt for motherhood in the near future as well as bring about changes in the experience of mothers (both early adults and middle adults).

Major theories on mother-child relationships and the role of the mother by Psychoanalysts and other theorists (Freud, Klein, Winnicott, Bowlby and others), have been very popular. Motherhood is an essential part of many women's lives, particularly in societies where traditional gender roles persist (Watts et al.2015). Mothering is a primary identity for adult women, and women's gender identity is reinforced by mothering (McMahon, 1995). Marriage and childbearing almost often define a woman's position within the family and her community (Benza and Liamputtong, 2015);

unfortunately motherhood as a psychological growth experience is seldom perceived in our society. Women's increasing autonomy is viewed as a threat to children, marriage and family stability (Blankenhorn, 1995). Recent research literature is impoverished as far as research addressing motherhood in the normal population is concerned. Research on the experiences of ageing mothers have also not been undertaken in this particular psycho-social set-up.

#### **Objectives:**

The study had two main objectives. Firstly, to explore the experiences and attitudes of young and middle adult biological mothers having children aged between less than a month to 35 years about their personal motherhood and motherhood in general. A second objective of the research was to gauge the perceptions and attitudes of young adult female undergraduate students about motherhood.

#### **Method**

##### **Tools used:**

Data was collected through 40 individual interviews involving a semi-structured set of open-ended questions rated by three experts which were digitally recorded with the consent of each participant. The participants comprised of adult mothers (early and middle adults), having children of a substantial age-range, divided into four groups (in group A - children were less than 10 years; in group B – children were aged between 11 and 18 years; and in group C – children were between 25 and 35 years), recruited through snowball sampling. Analysis of the interviews was conducted using a qualitative content analysis (more specifically, the thematic analysis) approach. Additionally, a self-constructed questionnaire comprising of twenty agree-disagree statements was administered, which was validated by experts comprising of educationists, psychologists and counselors in order to study the perception of 70 female college students ranging from 18 – 24 years about their own future mothering role (Table- 1).

##### **Procedure:**

The data collection was done in two distinct phases viz. the semi-structured interview schedule and a quantitative 20 item questionnaire

was administered on two different groups as mentioned above.

#### **Results**

Coding, sorting and organizing data are integral parts of thematic analysis. The data were searched manually for re-occurring words, which later became code words: these code words were then grouped to form themes. Descriptive statistics including frequency, mean, and standard deviation were used using SPSS software package (version 16.0) to describe sample characteristics. Chi-Square test was done to test the significance of results. The p-value  $\leq 0.05$  was considered as denoting statistical significance as shown in the tables.

#### **Discussion**

The findings revealed that 40% of the adolescent undergraduates aged between 18 and 23 years were negative towards future mothering role and the associated responsibilities. However, about 60% of the same sample, belonging to the same cohort, and having received almost similar socio-cultural messages and academic training (as the sample of under-graduate students were matched on their age and education level) expressed positive attitude towards future mothering responsibilities (Table-2). To these adolescents, motherhood did not seem to be burdensome or hindering career progress and ambitions. Although present day adolescent women are gradually moving towards whole-hearted dedication to career goals with diminishing focus on future family attachments and ties, motherhood still entails above average positive role perceptions and voluntary acceptance of responsibilities among them. Future research could address teenagers below the age of 18 years, to get a closer approximation of the exact age range at which such attitudes are forming and reforming.

The qualitative content analyses of the interviews of mothers at different phases of their motherhood reveal that as the women moved from young motherhood to older motherhood phases, they became increasingly accepting of their motherhood responsibilities. The mothers at their early phases of motherhood reported experiencing child-caring stresses, but none perceived the role to be either a hindrance or

**Table 1: Socio-demographic data of the study participants [Mothers (N1) =40; Students (N2) 70]**

Domains	N	Percentage
Age- 30 to 62 years	40	100%
Mothers (N1 = 40) Mean Age: 43 years		
<b>Motherhood Duration:</b>		
< 10 years	10	25%
Between 10 and 17 years.	10	25%
Between 18 and 25 years	10	25%
Between 26 and 35 years	10	25%
<b>Educational Level:</b>		
< Graduate	02	5%
> Graduate	38	95%
<b>Employment Status:</b>		
Working	24	60%
Non-working	16	40%
<b>Family Set-up</b>		
Joint	18	45%
Nuclear	22	55%

Domains	N	Percentage
<b>Age:</b>		
18 – 20 years	38	54.5 %
Students (N2 =70) 21 – 23 years	32	45.7 %
<b>Mean Age:</b>		
<b>Educational level:</b>		
Undergraduate 1st Year	28	40%
Undergraduate 2nd Year	10	14.28%
Undergraduate 3rd Year	32	45%

a burden. Often the responses were socially desirable, as “the child is a gift from God” and “It is the sole duty of the mother to leave everything else and care unselfishly for the child”. However, most responses were accepting of the role although these women were still in a trial-and-error phase of early adulthood. As the children and mothers both became older, the perception of stressors of child-rearing reduced significantly possibly due to the enhancing experience of mothers, as well as the shift of the early adults into the years of middle adulthood, as the latter entails heightened experiences of self-confidence (Clarke-Plaskie & Lachman, 1999),

self-esteem (Tracy, Gosling & Potter, 2002) and generative concern for society (Erikson, 1950).

The single most important concern for mothers with children below five years was health and well-being of the child. With progressively increasing age of children, the concern shifted to providing the child with a good education, transforming the child into a pro-social, norm-abiding adult human being with a personality adorned with noble virtues. All these goals carry strong social sanction, and thus the mothers at midlife, can be thought of as the torch-bearers of the socio-cultural ideals, transmitted to them by the previous generations. This revelation

**Table-2: Showing statement-wise agreement and disagreement percentages of under-graduate participants.**

	Statements	Agree		Disagree		$\chi^2$	P
		N	%	N	%		
	Positive						
1.	I think motherhood is indispensable to my womanhood.	31	44.49	39	55.71	0.914	N.S.
2.	I consider biological motherhood be a compulsory ingredient in the personal and family happiness of my life.	26	37.14	44	62.86	4.629	P<0.05
5.	My motherhood will define my position in the society and community.	26	37.14	44	62.86	4.629	P<0.05
6.	I think as an equal alternative to biological motherhood, I can adopt a child.	62	88.57	08	11.43	41.66	P<0.05
7.	Motherhood would make me complete.	41	58.57	29	41.43	02.06	N.S
8.	Patience, politeness and perseverance should always be there with me when I am a mother.	67	95.71	03	04.29	58.51	P<0.05
13.	Motherhood would teach me to identify my greatest strength.	53	75.71	17	24.29	18.51	P<0.05
16.	I aspire to make motherhood a crucial phase of my life.	54	77.14	16	22.86	20.63	P<0.05
17.	I would like to adopt a child instead of giving birth to one.	31	44.29	39	55.71	0.339	N.S
20.	Motherhood would lend my life a new purpose and meaning.	62	88.57	08	11.43	41.66	P<0.05
	Negative						
3.	I think it is acceptable and justified for me to opt out of motherhood by choice.	44	62.86	26	37.14	4.629	P<0.05
4.	The stress of my motherhood will create hindrances in the spheres of my life.	15	21.43	55	78.57	22.85	P<0.05
9.	I think as a mother I would have to make a lot of sacrifices.	72	74.29	18	25.71	16.51	P<0.05
10.	My life as a mother would be stressful.	17	24.29	53	75.71	18.51	P<0.05
11.	To me, motherhood is conscious responsibility all the time.	64	91.43	06	08.57	48.06	P<0.05
12.	As a mother, I have to be there for my child always.	62	88.57	08	11.43	41.66	P<0.05
14.	I think motherhood is unnecessarily glorified in our community.	24	34.29	46	65.71	06.91	P<0.05
15.	Motherhood is not a necessity to me.	26	37.14	44	62.86	4.63	P<0.05
18.	I would want to avoid the pain of childbirth.	18	25.71	52	74.29	16.51	P<0.05
19.	Motherhood will curtail my future aspirations.	09	12.86	61	87.14	38.63	P<0.05

comfortably fits in with Erikson's concept of midlife generativity (Erikson, 1950), where mid-lifers tend to develop with successful resolution of the previous psycho-social crises, the self-centered goals take a backseat and a concern-cum-commitment towards mentoring and establishing the next generation gain importance. These mothers with increasing age and experience can thus be said to be emerging as satisfactorily generative adult women.

Implications: The results suggest that by realizing the importance of experiences of motherhood might help in reducing conflict in the mothering role; intervention and supportive care needs to be gauged accordingly. Moreover, realizing students' perception of their future mothering role might help to assess the key components in their transition to motherhood.

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