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Wearing the mask of motherhood: The experience of maternal attachment using interpretative phenomenological analysis

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Becoming a mother is an intense experience which sets the foundation for future interactions and relationships for both mother and baby. Researchers have theorized that maternal infant attachment begins during the antenatal period and continues on through the postnatal period, though the reality of the experience for the mother remains largely unexplored. There are many variables, complexities and concepts that influence the maternal foetal/infant attachment relationship. Accordingly, this study examined how the concepts of transition to motherhood and identity influence a mother's experience of the attachment relationship during pregnancy and with her baby. Understanding these experiences has implications for practice and is relevant to the particular needs of the women, babies and families in our care and society. This three-phase project adopts a phenomenological approach where semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from nine women during pregnancy at approximately 35 week's gestation and at six and twelve weeks postnatal. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was utilized to synthesize themes. The super ordinate theme which emerged from the data during pregnancy was attachment relationship with the unborn baby and following birth: attachment interrupted and getting to know you emerged from the women's narratives. Following on from this, at twelve weeks postnatal the women had achieved a new understanding of their experience as reflected in the super ordinate themes: 'I have finally arrived', and 'Identity-wearing the mask of motherhood'. The longitudinal dimensions of the study enabled narratives to be collected valuing the unique perspectives of the participants and respectful of their lived experience, revealing ways in which the transition to motherhood and the experience of attachment from the maternal perspective is socially constructed and personally experienced. The epistemological and ontological perspectives led women to challenge assumptions around mothering which they may have previously held, which influenced their expectations and rendered experiences which did not conform to idealised notions of motherhood, difficult to voice or express. The women's narratives of their subjective experience convey the overwhelming nature of motherhood and the multifaceted phenomena that influence the attachment relationship. This study provides an insight into the experience of the transition to motherhood, the development of the attachment relationship of first-time mothers and how maternal identities are revealed by the narratives they convey. It also highlights the complexity of the maternal foetal/infant attachment. Finally, implications for education, research and practice are explored and elaborated.

Biography

Geraldine Mc Loughlin is a Midwife Lecturer and BSc (Hons) Midwifery Programme Co-Ordinator in the School of Nursing and Midwifery at University College Cork. Her PhD in Education explored Maternal Fetal/Infant Attachment during the transition to new motherhood using interpretative phenomenological analysis. She teaches modules across undergraduate and postgraduate midwifery and nursing. She also collaborates with continuing professional development in the acute Maternity hospital setting facilitating multidisciplinary training in PROMPT Obstetric Emergency Programmes and Neonatal Resuscitation Programmes. She has extensive senior clinical experience in all aspects of midwifery care in both the community facilitating home births and water birth and in the acute obstetric setting. She is experienced in quantitative and qualitative research methodologies particularly interpretive phenomenological analysis. Other research interests include psychological health during pregnancy and early motherhood, transition to parenthood, maternal morbidity and mortalities associated with childbirth, and organisational management of care.

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