

Transitioning to Motherhood: Navigating the changes in self-identity and the experiences associated with becoming a new Mother.

By

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Abstract

The intent of this research was to determine how does the transition to motherhood impacts a woman's identity, with an emphasis on the importance of maternal experiences. The literature review draws from a range of theoretical frameworks, particularly matricentric feminist theory, highlighting the complexities of maternal identity and the psychological, social, and cultural factors at play. Ultimately, this review underscores the importance of recognizing motherhood as a significant life transition that shapes women's identities in multifaceted ways. By prioritizing the exploration of maternal identity, this research aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological and social dimensions of motherhood, with the potential to enhance clinical practices and support systems for mothers navigating this critical phase of life.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Becoming a mother is often described as a joyful, fulfilling journey filled with connection, love, and purpose. Beneath the glow of anticipation, however, lies a complex reality – one where women navigate profound emotional, psychological, and physical changes (Leahy, 2023). The unrealistic ideals that new mothers may hold about having their first child often arise from idealized portrayals in media and popular culture, where the focus is placed on the rewards and joys of motherhood. At the same time, the challenges are ignored or minimized. As a result, new mothers often enter this life stage expecting a smooth and rewarding experience, only to be confronted with the demands of shifting relationships, sleepless nights, and the emotional rollercoaster of caring for a newborn (Hwang et al., 2022). This literature review explores the complexities associated with this transition, including the psychological impact, challenges, and adaptations that women face during this critical life event.

Overview of the Study

A critical concept that is slowly gaining momentum in women's health studies related to identity changes in motherhood is the term *matrescence*—a developmental journey akin to adolescence (Laney et al., 2015). The transition occurs in stages of pregnancy, birth, and after birth, bringing a lot of new positive experiences as well as significant chronic stressors (Athan, 2024). Like adolescence, *matrescence* changes the woman physically, psychologically, hormonally, socially, even spiritually, and politically (Health, 2024). In this sense, the transition to motherhood has profound intrinsic implications for women, such as the mother's identity, and goes beyond the biological and physical changes. During this developmental journey, first-time mothers often report confusion and uncertainty navigating

this transition and require new adaptations and adjustments at their physical, emotional, and socio-cultural levels (Babetin, 2020). New mothers must quickly learn and negotiate new skills and roles related to childcare and parenthood while at the same time renegotiating the dynamics of their lives, including familial, work, and social relationships (Athan, 2024).

There is substantial research and evidence documenting motherhood. Hwang et al. (2022) state that the process of becoming a mother is essential to forming a maternal sense of self. This process involves internalizing new responsibilities, reshaping personal and professional roles, and navigating societal expectations, all of which contribute to the evolving identity that new mothers must adopt during this life-changing period (Hennekam et al., 2019). Studies related to motherhood have generally been all-encompassing regarding exploring several viewpoints, such as the journey of becoming a new mother, the child-mother bonding experience, and the process of adapting to new roles as a mother in ever-changing societal contexts (Laney et al., 2015). This study portrays the shift into motherhood as a profound journey of transformation, encompassing changes across multiple dimensions of existence, including identity, roles, relationships, behaviors, and abilities. During the stage of transition, individuals may undergo metamorphosis in their social relationships and the surrounding community, and it may vary according to the following factors: individual, socio-political, and economic, among others (Hennekam et al., 2019). The fact that mental health is almost always a relevant topic in the present era, the stress of the mothers and postpartum disorders especially, it becomes critical to study this transition as an entire process.

Relevance and Justification of the Topic

Maternal issues during matrescence continue to be the most life-changing circumstances a woman can undergo, with far-reaching consequences to her mental,

emotional, and physical health (Orchard et al., 2023). Supporting women through this period requires a holistic understanding that extends beyond the mother's experiences to consider the roles of healthcare systems, family dynamics, societal expectations, and community support (Machirori, 2021). An in-depth exploration of the transition to motherhood is necessary as it not only benefits new mothers, but also families, communities, and healthcare providers. Challenges such as inadequate social support, limited mental health literacy, stigma around maternal mental health, and lack of accessible resources can compound the difficulties mothers face during this time (Raudasoja et al., 2022). Such insights will empower mental health professionals to develop and implement more effective, compassionate interventions tailored to support women on their journey through motherhood.

Gaps in existing literature also warrant investigation into the transition to motherhood. At present, few studies provide an integrated view that includes socio-cultural and economic factors that affect the developmental process of new mothers. Failing to consider the interplay of the wide range of factors that influence a mother's adaptation to motherhood can result in a fragmented understanding of maternal experiences (Sidesinger, 2024). For example, in addition to postpartum depression (PPD), a mother may have to deal with other issues, such as stigma, financial problems, and her partner's lack of support (Fleischman et al., 2022). Another issue is that most of the studies are done in the regions of developed and high-income countries. This leaves significant gaps in understanding how the economic and socio-cultural contexts affect the transition to motherhood in low-income regions. The inclusion of diverse populations would help to alleviate the inequalities related to maternal care and guide the formulation of more culture-reflective practices. Expanding the focus to include diverse populations will help address the disparity in maternal care and inform more culturally sensitive practices.

Moreover, the shift in motherhood goes beyond the women's experience but also is a public health issue. This matter is very important, and it is illustrated by the need for a healthcare system of counseling psychology, pediatrics, family medicine, obstetrics, and gynecology in a way that provides all multidisciplinary support services for women transitioning to motherhood. Webb et al. 2021 argue that many healthcare professionals may need more awareness or necessary training to address the needs of new mothers adequately. Given that the transition to motherhood involves a complex interplay of individual and social factors, this study seeks to advocate for a more integrated approach to maternal care.

Overview of Prior Research

Research in the area of transitioning to motherhood has encompassed different aspects of the maternal experience, like maternal identity, mental health, role responsibilities, and the impact of social support systems (Fleischman et al., 2022). The research has produced extensive literature about the emotional, psychological, and social problems women face from pregnancy to postpartum and into early motherhood (Hwang et al., 2022; Dagher et al., 2021).

A thoroughly researched aspect is maternal mental health. Longitudinal studies have also proved that maternal postpartum depression (PPD) is more likely to persist outside the immediate postpartum period and can even continue up to the early years of a child's development and growth (Batt et al., 2020). Other areas that have been researched around maternal mental health are birth-related trauma, postpartum anxiety, and maternal burnout (Raneberg & McCallum, 2024). Although these conditions are less frequently discussed than PPD, they contribute significantly to maternal stress. The fear of not adequately fulfilling the idealized maternal expectations of "good mothering", according to Raneberg & McCallum

(2024), can significantly increase the levels of anxiety in new mothers, leading to a negative perception of the self.

Researchers have also devoted their efforts to studying the role of social support in maternal experiences. Arnold-Baker (2019) demonstrates a consistent correlation between the availability and quality of social support and a woman's experience of motherhood. The existing research indicates that social support from healthcare providers and partners during pregnancy and postpartum may help women cope with the transition. According to the qualitative descriptive study of Mcleish et al. (2021), there are nine major themes of interest regarding social support towards new mothers. The two most effective are appraisal and information support. This study accentuates the significance of healthcare professionals in the postnatal period. Mcleish et al. (2021) emphasize that by providing intimate emotional, informational, and appraisal support alongside their clinical responsibilities, healthcare providers can substantially help new mothers gain confidence and better navigate the demands of early motherhood. Also, it has been noted that support from family members, both in the form of practical help and community support like peer support groups, has been effective in providing essential coping mechanisms for caregivers at the onset of motherhood (Hennekam et al., 2019). Although social support is greatly emphasized and understood by all, there is still a gap in the understanding of how the different types of support are sought and received by mothers across cultures and classes.

The transition to motherhood is also influenced by economic and socio-cultural factors. Motherhood is reported by Schmidt et al. (2023) and Constantinou et al. (2021) to contain cultural ideals of selfless devotion. Though the images of the mother as a selfless heroine are pervasive, such portrayals create undue anticipatory stresses on first-time mothers, resulting in elevated anxiety and stress (Shloim et al., 2020). The cross-cultural investigations have also shown that the attributes of parenting and the meaning of being a

parent are not universal, as there are societies that emphasize the importance of rearing children in a community, while others uphold ideals of independence and self-sufficiency (Shorey et al., 2024). Other factors include the family's economic situation, which is one of the determinants influencing the motherhood experience. According to Shorey et al. (2024), such women tend to experience more difficulties adjusting to motherhood owing to the absence of social services, finances, and healthcare. The physical and emotional demands of motherhood, combined with financial stress, can exacerbate mental health issues and hinder a mother's ability to care for herself and her child effectively.

Gaps in the Research

Even though the transition to motherhood has been the focus of scholarly attention for decades, the area is still far from being fully exhausted. Within the framework of the transition to motherhood, a lifeworld research approach and phenomenological-hermeneutic qualitative methodology remain unexplored. This method would contribute more to the understanding of mothers' lived experiences in relation to their transition to motherhood by integrating how they understand it. Traditional research methods differ from the phenomenological-hermeneutic one in that the latter emphasizes the individual's experience about the concepts and the way these experiences are constructed with the help of the individual's surrounding world, thus helping in understanding the psychosocial aspects of motherhood.

Furthermore, more longitudinal studies tracking women throughout the transition from pregnancy to the early years of motherhood are needed. A lot of the current research concentrates on specific periods, such as antenatal or postpartum or the transition to early motherhood (1-3 years postpartum). It fails to consider the evolution of the maternal experience over time (Finlayson et al., 2020). In this sense, there is a need for more

longitudinal studies that follow new mothers throughout the entire transition, offering insights into both individual and group-level changes or patterns that emerge over time.

Furthermore, there is limited research on how factors such as mental health, maternal identity, and social support interact (Bedaso et al., 2021). An intersectional perspective on investigating the transition into motherhood is key to discovering how intersecting identities shape the maternal experience. Over the years, most researchers have developed studies that look at one aspect of maternal experience in isolation from each other, which makes it difficult to draw cause-and-effect conclusions. Holistic and cumulative research that synthesizes findings is needed to understand how the determinants of health during the transition to motherhood work together. Intersectional analyses utilize the mixed methods approach, which engages lived experiences from several groups of maternal identities, to help examine the similarities and differences based on identities and social categories (Bedaso et al., 2021).

Research Problem Statement

The research question to be addressed in this literature reviews centers on “How does the transition to motherhood impact a woman’s identity?” This literature review is devoted to the lack of a panoramic understanding of matrescence or the transition to motherhood as a multi-faceted phenomenon that contains bio-psycho-socio-cultural dimensions. Usually, media and cultural narratives depict the transition to motherhood in a romanticized, straightforward way (Walters, 2023). The idealized perceptions of motherhood, which are perpetuated by the "good mother" ideology, imply that a successful mother follows the dominant parental tenets of society (Shloim et al., 2020). The quest of first-time mothers navigating this transition through the lens of the good mother ideology leads to profound pressures. Existing literature provides insights into the nuances of this transition, such as

maternal mental health, individual identity shifts, cultural expectations, and the role of social support, most of the research tends to discuss components separately, without presenting these as part of the entire process.

Therefore, the current review is based on the problem that a large part of the literature focuses on isolated variables and does not examine how integrated elements interact. For example, while research on postpartum depression is well-addressed, there is still little work done on understanding how cultural norms of motherhood may intensify feelings of inadequacy or how fiscal strain can worsen mental health problems during this transition. Women are impacted during the transition to motherhood as they go through psychological, emotional, and social strains (Finlayson et al., 2020).

How cultural expectations affect maternal experiences is another aspect of the transition to motherhood that remains underexplored. The experiences that women undergo during this critical transition are bound to be influenced by cultural practices (Garcia-Lorenzo et al., 2023). This means that studying and understanding their experiences through a cross-cultural lens can inform balanced and culturally responsive maternity interventions. Another understudied dimension is research on how social and economic factors interplay with biological changes to influence mental health outcomes. Garcia-Lorenzo et al. (2023) emphasize that the intricate interplay of social determinants of health and maternal experiences calls for responsive and inclusive approaches to maternal healthcare. Nevertheless, little is known about interventions that effectively integrate psychological and social support systems to improve maternal well-being in the long term.

If the knowledge gaps in the current literature are not addressed, the risk of adverse health outcomes for mothers and society will continue to be high (Mehta et al., 2021). The failure of healthcare systems to adopt more comprehensive and integrated approaches could

perpetuate inadequate care models. This could result in ineffective treatment plans that fail to address the root causes of maternal distress, leading to ongoing struggles for mothers.

Moreover, if the multifaceted nature of the transition to motherhood is not addressed, there is a risk of a continued rise in far-reaching negative consequences affecting the quality of life of the mothers, their ability to bond with their infants, and the overall dynamics of family life.

Rationale

The literature review is completed in response to the challenge of the psychological, social, and cultural dimensions needing to be better incorporated in the study of transitions to motherhood. Despite the increasing focus on maternal health, the available literature tends to focus on specific areas, for instance, mental health or social support, which disregards other interrelated factors that relate to a woman's adjustment to motherhood (Adlington et al., 2023). The literature reviewed will focus on the physical, psychological, social, and relational changes during the transition to motherhood and how they impact the woman's identity. For this paper, the changes across the biological and spiritual dimension will be excluded for the purpose of brevity. The intention, therefore, is to point out those gaps and suggest how future research can fill these gaps, thus enabling the design of more integrated interventions for maternal health care.

Significance of the Study

This study is of immense importance in providing a deeper insight into the various factors that shape the transition to motherhood. One of the major contributions this study can make is enhancing the knowledge base within counseling psychology regarding maternal mental health. Maternal mental health encompasses mothers' overall emotional, social, and mental well-being, both during and after pregnancy (Babetin, 2020). While the professionals who deal with maternal mental health address individual components such as postpartum

depression, there is a lack of holistic approaches that consider the full range of maternal experiences. This literature review combines these various aspects to develop a clearer understanding of the factors that influence the transition to motherhood. A comprehensive view will assist professionals in the counselling field in producing appropriate models of intervention and therapy, which are not limited to mental health but also consider cultural and societal factors that affect a mother's adjustment.

Furthermore, much of the existing research on aspects of motherhood continues to be scattered. When women become mothers, it is unlikely that they will realize or experience a loss of self-identity until they are progressing through this stage. Changes in self-identity are commonly discussed are a common theme in academic research yet, there is no discussion of changes in self identity in cultural and societal discourses surrounding motherhood. Most of the existing research tend to filter various components of maternal experience without examining how they interact (Hwang et al., 2022; Hennekam et al., 2019). Therefore, this review intends to illuminate how the literature is lacking and does not capture the co-occurrence of biological influences and mental health outcomes, socio-cultural norms, relationship processes, and economic stresses. By synthesizing research from a wide range of disciplines—psychology, sociology, public health, and gender studies—the study seeks to offer a more integrated view of the transition to motherhood.

Beyond the immediate maternal and clinical applications, the findings of this study can have broader implications for practice and policy in maternal health care. When mothers experience conflict around mothering or negotiating their new identity, they may inadvertently be labeled as bad mothers, and their experiences may be pathologized (Machiori, 2021). As a result, healthcare professionals ranging from doctors to psychologists may perpetuate the myths of motherhood by not understanding the creation of mothering ideals or the shift in identities new mothers balance during this incredible transformative

period (Machiori, 2021). Providing women with education and support as they negotiate different versions of a mothering identity allows new mothers to embrace their feelings and self-agency amidst their concept of what makes a good mother (Machiori, 2021). The term *matrescence* is important then as it provides women the language and opportunity to normalize the extremely complex transition of becoming a mother, away from cultural and societal expectations and limitations. It encapsulates the mother's experience and provides an authentic and realistic framework that allows space for all the momentous changes that occur within a woman as she transitions to motherhood. Recognizing *matrescence* as a distinct developmental stage in new mothers' lives can shape how mental health professionals, especially in counseling psychology, approach maternal care (Athán, 2019; Athán, 2024).

The main purpose of this emerging study is also to create opportunities to fill existing gaps in the research undertaken thus far, develop more comprehensive and culturally oriented counseling approaches, and seek ways to enhance the well-being of mothers and their children. Since the research addresses the nuances that accompany the shift into motherhood, it seeks to advance the discipline of counseling psychology and assist in creating cohesive and effective mental health services for mothers.

Theoretical Framework

Matricentric feminist theory provides a critical framework to explore the transition to motherhood by centering on the lived experiences and unique identity transformations that women undergo as they become mothers (O'Reily 2019). Contrary to classical feminist theories, which mostly view women in professional, political, and social arenas apart from motherhood, matricentric feminism argues that motherhood is both an embodied and an existential state, deserving of theoretical exploration for its complexities, contradictions, and value (Kuri & Fierheller, 2022). The school of thought emphasizes that maternal identity is

not a peripheral aspect of a woman's experience but a central and transformative one that deserves its own theoretical and practical considerations.

Central to the matricentric theory is the idea that motherhood is an identity in its own right, one that profoundly influences a woman's sense of self, autonomy, and relationships (da Silva, 2023). Key concepts in this theory include matricentric identity, which views the mother's self-concept as both distinct from and interwoven with her other identities, and maternal agency, which recognizes the mother's ability to exercise autonomy and make meaningful decisions within and outside the family unit (Broughton, 2022). A foundational proposition of this theory is that mothers often experience unique challenges tied to societal expectations, the pressures of intensive mothering, and a lack of institutional support. These forces contribute to a profound identity shift as women navigate their new roles and the social constructs that shape motherhood as an identity in their respective cultural and social contexts (O'Reily, 2019).

As mentioned earlier, the transition to motherhood is a time of intense psychological and social change (Babetin, 2020). Matricentric feminist theory provides a framework through which to understand how new mothers renegotiate their sense of self and identity as they navigate a role that is widely romanticized and yet devalued (Smith, 2021). Within this framework, the forces and expectations bearing down on mothers can be explored, as well as how those forces shape the sense of self, including how mothers must navigate personal autonomy and the social demand for self-sacrifice in motherhood. The theory also analyzes the internal tension involved as mothers negotiate their new identities with old parts of themselves, analyzing the emotional and psychological struggles inherent in these changes.

Matricentric feminism also provides a framework to understand how their identities shift as they take on the role of a mother (O'Reilly & Green, 2024). This also entails looking

at how mothers reconcile their interests, aspirations, and careers with society's expectations regarding what constitutes a 'good mother.' In this sense, matricentric feminism also brings to light the phenomenon of *maternal ambivalence*, where feelings of love and devotion coexist with moments of frustration, isolation, or even regret (Kuri & Fierheller, 2022). These factors are often disparaged by society, but under the matricentric feminism framework, such emotions are perceived as part and parcel of being a mother. Thus, through this lens, this study will argue that motherhood is a legitimate primary identity for women in that it affects how they see themselves, their interactions, and their position in the broader society.

Definition of Terms

Matrescence: The physical, emotional, hormonal, and social transition to becoming a mother (Athán, 2024).

Maternal Mental Health: This term refers to the overall emotional, social, and mental well-being of a mother, both during and after pregnancy (Coo et al., 2022).

Maternal Identity: The perceptual unity of consciousness, self-perception, and feeling of a woman as a mother, as well as her own realization of maternity (Hwang et al., 2022).

Postpartum Depression (PPD): A mood disorder that affects some women after childbirth and is characterized by persistent feelings of anxiety, sadness, and fatigue (Carlson et al., 2024).

Postpartum Adjustment: The adjustment process through which mothers adapt to their new roles, responsibilities, and identities following childbirth (Asadi et al., 2022).

Researcher's Positioning Statement

My interest in the transition to motherhood, resulting in a shift in identity, begins with my journey into motherhood. As a cis-gendered, university-educated, married Canadian

female of Indian origin, I experienced nothing as life-altering as becoming a first-time new mom. I felt unprepared for the transition to becoming a mom despite attending birthing classes and having a healthy pregnancy, a supportive husband, friends, and family, and being financially secure. I came across the term matrescence, as explained by reproductive psychiatrist Dr. Alexandra Sacks, and suddenly, my motherhood journey began to make sense. Although I live in a Westernized patriarchal society, I was surprised how we lacked the correct language terms and support around this experience for new mothers. This influenced my academic focus on maternal mental health and the need for better understanding to support women during this critical time. My experiences have also heightened my awareness of the cultural and social factors that play a role in maternal adjustment, leading me to approach this research with a strong emphasis on holistic and culturally sensitive care.

Overview of the Paper

This paper is structured as follows:

1. Chapter One introduces the study, its relevance, and the problem it seeks to address.
2. Chapter Two outlines the methods used in the literature search.
3. Chapter Three provides a comprehensive review of the literature on the transition to motherhood.
4. Chapter Four applies the findings to clinical practice.
5. Chapter Five offers recommendations for future research and concludes the paper.

Chapter 2: Methods of Literature Search

Description of the Literature Search Process

A thorough search utilizing several relevant research databases was undertaken to review the available literature on the transition to motherhood widely. The stepwise procedure across the different data sources peer-reviewed journal articles, books and dissertations related to maternal health, mothering social networks, and psychological changes within this important transition in a woman's life.

Each source considered in this research had an important aspect of studying the transition to motherhood. Concise, peer-reviewed articles were the backbone of this research because these represent the highest quality of academic writing (Sharma et al., 2023). These articles pass through rigorous peer review, which encompasses evaluation of the study's relevance, trustworthiness, integrity, and originality, ensuring that only the reliable research is published. For this study, peer-reviewed articles on matrescence, maternal psychology, postpartum mental health, and social support were the significant areas addressed in ensuring the coverage of pertinent literature regarding the transition to motherhood. In contrast, books engaged with the transition to motherhood from several perspectives, creating a more complex picture of specific issues. Books often address the problem in question and prove useful as they present the necessary background information for discussing the themes in the literature review. Dissertations and theses were also valuable because they often represent emerging research and topics yet to be published in peer-reviewed articles.

Realizing that using a single, general database would generate significantly biased and inadequate results across the various domains of the transition to motherhood, the

search adopted a tailored approach by applying customized search syntax for multiple databases. Also, the search included smaller, more specialized databases, which helped to capture more focused literature on the topic. The databases that were assessed are PsycINFO, PubMed, Google Scholar, and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. PsycINFO is one of the most verified search engines in psychological studies and a commonly used psychological e-database tool that provides a wide range of articles and allows for filtering search parameters to the most relevant ones. The database contains summaries and citations of journals, technical reports, books, book chapters, dissertations, and theses on psychology and mental health.

Google Scholar is considered a user-friendly search engine that contains high-quality literature such as books, abstracts, theses, peer-reviewed articles, and up-to-date journals from academic publishers and editors of professional societies. The relevance of using Google Scholar in this search is that it can easily uncover secondary sources of literature and interdisciplinary studies and locate journals that are not so often provided by traditional databases. Every search engine and database has its unique contribution, ensuring that the literature search was thorough and included various perspectives on the topic.

Search Parameters

To ensure a comprehensive and targeted literature review, specific search parameters were established, encompassing the following aspects: search items, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the scope of the literature considered.

Search Terms

Search terms or keywords were the primary elements of the research problem. The development of the search terms was carried out in three stages: (1) the main concepts of the topic of interest were recognized, namely the transition to motherhood; (2) synonyms and antonyms for one or another topic were sought, and (3) abbreviations were expanded. To

prevent any gap in the literature review of all the different aspects of the transition to motherhood, the following search keywords were included: matrescence, maternal self-esteem, maternal role development, maternal mental health, postpartum physiological depression, psychological aspects of motherhood adjustment, and support for mothers.

Boolean operators "AND" and "OR" combined search terms and refined the search results. Using Boolean operators has proven beneficial in increasing accuracy as they reduced the search results to only what is relevant and excluded unnecessary information. For example, searches focusing on "postpartum depression" OR "maternal depression" were more inclusive in searching for those allied conditions. Likewise, searching for "transition to motherhood" AND "maternal mental health" aimed to find literature specifically addressing the psychological aspects of this transition. Using quotation marks for the specific search terms also assisted in confirming that the databases contained the relevant information sought.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

It was of utmost importance to establish the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the purposes of sourcing high-quality and pertinent research studies only. The inclusion criteria pertained to the research on the transition to motherhood – within studies that were published between 2010 and 2024. The use of recent sources made it easier to narrow down the research to what has been most recently done, especially on maternal health, women's social support systems, and women's mental health.

Furthermore, the review placed an emphasis on peer-reviewed articles so that the chosen studies had undergone scrutiny and evaluation by experts in the area. The thoroughness of the peer-reviewed works' evaluation process was considered appropriate to maintain the academic scientific quality of the review. The literature, which fulfilled the two requirements above, were subsequently organized according to the main topics displayed.

Specifically, the studies included in the review examined the social, cultural, and psychological dimensions of the transition to motherhood. The articles focusing on interventions and social support during this transition were also useful in that they offered strategies and techniques that were relevant to the field of counseling psychology.

The exclusion criteria employed across the search results aimed to eliminate less credible or irrelevant sources. For the thematic analysis, any source that had been published prior to 2020 was considered out of the scope of the study. The purpose of including those sources was to prevent basing the information on previous research or studies that may not be relevant to current perceptions of mothers and mental health. Taking this approach was necessary since the most recent studies usually build on the previous ones, revising the theories and methods of the earlier work. Furthermore, any article that delved into biological, physiological processes of becoming a mother, infancy and child development, attachment theory any other category that connected the impact of the mother on the child was excluded. This also included articles that pathologized the mother's experience or where mothers were diagnosed with a mental health condition such as postpartum depression or perinatal mood and anxiety disorders (PMAD). This was important because it was necessary to encapsulate the mother's experience during the transition and to focus the literature on the emotional, social, and cultural aspects.

Non-peer-reviewed sources were also excluded, except for significant secondary sources of literature that offered critical insights. Prioritizing peer-reviewed literature ensured that the review was founded on high-quality, trustworthy studies that met the standards of academic integrity.

Range of Literature Considered

A broad range of literature from diverse sources was incorporated into the review to accurately capture the nature of this life-changing experience. Understanding the risk of bias,

evidence was sourced from multiple sources to minimize the possibility of erroneous data. This approach ensured that the review featured different opinions, perspectives, and data points for a more well-rounded view and deeper understanding of the transition to motherhood. In addition, integrating different sources was necessary to boost the trustworthiness of the information presented in this paper.

Critical Analysis of Methodological Approaches

Qualitative Paradigm

The emphasis on the mothers' experience and transformation of their identity also called for a review of qualitative research approaches, including narrative, phenomenological, and grounded theory studies as the most suitable ones. Such qualitative approaches are excellent in the analysis and understanding of the depth of maternal experiences and rich appreciation of struggles women go through concerning their profound change of self. Longitudinal studies were viewed as highly beneficial for their ability to assess the levels of maternal wellbeing over a period, giving the study a temporal aspect concerning the adjustment process of mothers. This approach also demonstrated how different aspects would impact maternal identity development and the psychological aspects that relate to the motherhood transition.

The evaluation also focused equally on both types of research in order to present a comprehensive picture. In a nutshell, qualitative studies focus on the experience of the participants. These studies include, among others, focus groups and interviews regarding women's perceptions of their transition to motherhood and how they navigate that stage. Qualitative studies helped look at mothers' emotional factors and conflicts, which are often not addressed in research studies.

Quantitative Paradigm

Additionally, quantitative studies provided measurable data on key issues such as the prevalence of PPD and other mental health conditions among new mothers. For instance, studies that quantify the impact of social factors and establish correlations between factors affecting maternal health were crucial for understanding how different aspects – instrumental, emotional, or informational – can buffer against the challenges mothers face during this life-changing phase. Quantitative studies also helped identify at-risk populations, providing evidence for targeted interventions and policy recommendations to improve maternal health outcomes.

Cross-cultural studies were also included in the review with the aim of broadening the scope of understanding the transition to motherhood beyond a singular geographical or cultural context. As the adjective cross-cultural implies, these studies recognize the ethnic, regional, and national disparities that exist, and they are designed in ways that bridge them. In this sense, the cross-cultural research incorporated in this review highlighted the longstanding differences in how different parts of the world perceive and support motherhood.

In some cultures, individualism prevails – leading to different challenges and expectations for maternal health – whereas in others, extended family systems play a significant role in supporting new mothers. Incorporating those studies made it possible to elaborate more on the motherhood experience transition, bearing in mind that social relations are culture-bound and maternal ramifications are inseparable from such relations.

Outlining search parameters (search terms, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the scope of literature reviewed) helped achieve a broad and thorough understanding of the transition into motherhood. The idea was to tackle the complexity of mothers' experiences,

which were the focus of many types of literature, especially those dealing with the psychological and social dimensions of the topic.

Selection of Articles

The literature selection process focused on articles that explore emotional, social, and psychological factors influencing the transition to motherhood. The review prioritized studies examining new mothers' identity development, emotional adaptation, and self-concept. These articles were chosen to provide insights into the self-perceptions and emotional adjustments mothers experience in this new role, ensuring relevance to support and therapeutic interventions. Articles centered on systemic or resource-focused interventions were excluded to narrow the focus to individual psychological experiences and transformations. This approach was taken to provide a clearer understanding of personal growth, identity shifts, and emotional challenges in the early stages of motherhood, relevant to informing support and interventions for new mothers. Table 1 below summarizes the 18 articles included in the review, further analyzed in the findings section.

Table 1

Author	Year	Title	Journal	Type
Arnold-Baker, C.	2019	The Process of Becoming: Maternal Identity in the Transition to Motherhood	Existential Analysis	Qualitative (Phenomenology)
Athan, A.	2024	Matrescence as a Theoretical Space for Renewal	Psychoanalytic Perspectives	Theoretical Review
Athan, A. M.	2024	A Critical Need for the Concept of Matrescence in Perinatal Psychiatry	Frontiers in Psychiatry	Theoretical Review
Babetin, K.	2020	The Birth of a Mother: A Psychological Transformation	J Prenat Perinat Psychol Health	Qualitative
Finlayson, K., et al.	2020	What Matters to Women in the Postnatal Period: A Meta-Synthesis of Qualitative Studies	PLoS ONE	Meta-Synthesis

Garcia-Lorenzo, L., et al.	2023	The Becoming of Worker Mothers: The Untold Narratives of an Identity Transition	Gender, Work & Organization	Qualitative
Hennekam, S.	2016	Identity Transition During Pregnancy: The Importance of Role Models	Human Relations	Qualitative
Hennekam, S., et al.	2019	A Multilevel Perspective of the Identity Transition to Motherhood	Gender, Work & Organization	Qualitative
Hwang, W. Y., et al.	2022	Concept Analysis of Transition to Motherhood: A Methodological Study	Korean J Women Health Nursing	Conceptual Analysis
Laney, E. K., et al.	2014	Expanding the Self: Motherhood and Identity Development in Faculty Women	Journal of Family Issues	Qualitative
Machirori, M.	2021	Constructs and Contradictions of Mothering Identities in a Contemporary Urban Setting	DiGeSt-Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies	Qualitative (Case Study)
Paterson, S., et al.	2019	I Am More Than a Mom: Stories of Parental Leave During the Transition to Motherhood	Social Policy & Administration	Qualitative
Raudasoja, M., et al.	2022	I Feel Many Contradictory Emotions”: Finnish Mothers' Discursive Struggles with Motherhood	Journal of Marriage and Family	Qualitative (Thematic Analysis)
Seppälä, T., et al.	2022	Development of First-Time Mothers' Sense of Shared Identity with Other Mothers	Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology	Quantitative
Shloim, N., et al.	2020	“Motherhood is Like a Roller Coaster...”: UK & Israeli Women’s Experiences of Motherhood 6-12 Months Postpartum	Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology	Qualitative
Sidesinger, T.	2024	Introduction to the Special Issue on Maternal Subjectivity	Psychoanalytic Perspectives	Editorial
Simmons, R. T., et al.	2021	Mothering Identity Experiences: A Backwards Glance	The Family Journal	Qualitative (Narrative Analysis)

Trussell, D. et al.	2024	Negotiating Intensive Mothering and Gendered Politics of Active Leisure Among First-Time Mothers in Canada.	Leisure/Loisir	Qualitative (Thematic Analysis)
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Data Analysis Procedures

In this literature review, data analysis was carried out through a systematic process to select, categorize, and combine the major themes regarding transition to motherhood. In the first step, articles were selected according to the set inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure their relevance with studies focusing on maternal identity, psychological and emotional changes, and studying the concept of matrescence. After that, each selected article was analyzed regarding core themes, methods, and results. A thematic analysis was performed on qualitative, quantitative, and theoretical studies where emergent themes were found. In this step, articles were organized according to the studies (e.g., phenomenology, concept analysis, meta-synthesis) and the central topics they covered, such as identity change, role strain, and emotional distress. This allowed for a structured and organized approach in understanding how each study contributed to the broader knowledge base.

The second level of data analysis combined results from various investigations to generalize regarding the determinants of motherhood transition. The research on psychological development, the changes in social roles, and the transformation of the self were cross-examined for similarities and differences in their conclusions. Consideration was given to each of the methodological strengths and weaknesses to evaluate the results' trustworthiness and generalizability. The thematic clusters were created to illustrate the multifaceted nature of maternal identity and the challenges associated with becoming a mother. This thematic synthesis contributed a vital integrative aspect, broadening the

understanding of motherhood as a transition and its determinants in terms of clinical implications and social policies.

Evaluation of Significant Studies Reviewed

Certain key studies were very important in investigating the transition to motherhood. For instance, Simmons et al. (2020) were one of the few to conduct an extensive qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study of women's perceptions of becoming mothers. This study focused on how the experience of the child-bearing process in eight new mothers within the last 24 months influences a woman's view of herself not only as a mother, but also as an individual. Simmons et al. (2020) researched several important predictors of maternal identity. They considered such factors as the practice of self-comparison and self-doubt, as well as the experience of watching various development stages of children. However, the results cannot be generalized because the study only included eight participants.

Another research study by Hwang et al. (2022) employs concept analysis in an effort to define the concept of transitioning into motherhood more clearly. The authors applied Walker and Avant's concept analysis framework to examine matrescence's physical, psychological, social, and relational factors. The findings presented in this study have profound implications for clinical practice. In particular, the attributes and consequences of the transition to motherhood, as analyzed by Hwang et al. (2020), can help healthcare providers offer more tailored care and support to new mothers. Nevertheless, the primary research deficiency hinders the extent to which the study enables an understanding of the transitional experience of the women included in this research.

Raudasoja et al. (2022) aimed to explore different perspectives and facets of motherhood using a qualitative approach. The authors utilized vicars-contrapuntal analysis, which, although better associated with relational dialectic theory, points out other structures at play during the transition to motherhood from which conflicting themes emerge. The

attempt to highlight such conflicting themes such as parenting is rewarding versus parenting is challenging, allows for a more extensive understanding of motherhood in society. The entire set of 479 subjects responded to open-ended questions, which helped capture the views and experiences of new mothers, yielding rich data explaining how the mothers deal with various issues. However, the general questionnaires that were self-reported also have limitations as to how the respondents may have portrayed their experiences. Moreover, the respondents of this research were only Finnish mothers, which narrows the applicability of the obtained results to other sociocultural settings.

The studies reviewed highlighted significant advancements in understanding the transition to motherhood and revealed important gaps in the literature. The gaps in the research highlighted the need for comprehensive, culturally informed, and longitudinal research on the experience of a woman's transition to motherhood. Addressing these gaps will contribute to a more holistic understanding of motherhood and inform better clinical practices for supporting new mothers.

Challenges Encountered During the Literature Search

The literature search process was not free from difficulties. One of the most substantive difficulties encountered was the wide-ranging nature of the topic, which resulted in sizable literature to wade through. Various factors affect the transition to motherhood, ranging from biological and psychological issues to the prevailing cultures and societal factors. Each of these perspectives contributes unique insights, thereby complicating the process of identifying an overarching theme or a cohesive narrative within the literature.

Another issue was the lack of literature around matrescence. Although I started the literature review in 2022, only in the last two years has the field of psychology been incorporating this term and there are virtually few studies that have been done specifically focusing on the stage of matrescence that is part of every mother's life.

The last challenge revolved around the interdisciplinary aspect of the subject under focus. Generally, transitioning to motherhood falls under various academic disciplines such as psychology, sociology, healthcare and medicine, public health, and cultural studies. However, each of these disciplines has its own vocabulary and distinct ways of expressing similar ideas. For instance, what may be referred to as "maternal mental health" in psychology may be framed as "reproductive health" in health sciences. This divergence complicated the literature search, as a complete understanding of relevant terms from different disciplines was essential to ensure that the literature search was exhaustive.

Limitations of the Methodology

Although the search process supported a thorough literature review, a couple of key issues restricted the analysis of the study results. First, the review was confined to English-language publications, adversely affecting its scope and accessibility. Most English language literature is skewed from a Western-oriented point of view, and some relevant research based in a non-English speaking country may be missed because of the possibility of different research methodologies. It is also probable that issues regarding the transition to motherhood in foreign, predominantly non-English speaking societies are not adequately captured in English literature, creating global knowledge gaps on such challenges.

While the attention given to current findings benefits the cause, one cannot help but wonder if attention only paid to the results of new studies can render older theories, approaches, and even paradigms that built the field of study useless or ignored. Quite a few of the works published prior to the year 2010 have very relevant models and concepts that can aid in the study of maternal identity, and hence, reviewing them should retell how the ideas have developed, the change of the perspective of the society regarding motherhood, and where the present discourse began. In so doing, this study would help appreciate the history

of maternal identity and maternal experiences more widely and deeply, considering many different decades.

Notably, however, the literature review was conducted to show a range of perspectives on the transition to motherhood, especially those psychological and social aspects that are most relevant to counseling psychology and clinical work.

Chapter 3: Review of the Literature

The transition to motherhood is a monumental change for women, as women experience a shift in identity and across relationships with friends, family, friends, the workplace, and the society in which they live (Paterson et al., 2018). Such shifts broadly affect women's identity, health, and well-being. This chapter will focus on exploring the transition to motherhood in terms of identity change and will address how becoming a mother influences women's self-concept, identity, and emotional landscape.

Identity Transformation in Motherhood

'Transition to motherhood' refers to the transformation women undergo as they take on the role of a mother. What the transition to motherhood has been and how researchers have used the concept has changed over time. This is also the reason that the term 'transitioning to motherhood' has been used as a synonym for antecedent factors, including the physiological changes of pregnancy, the psychosocial adaptation to new roles, and the effects of external factors (Priest, 2021). All these factors have an overarching impact on how women, particularly new mothers, negotiate their transition into motherhood and remind us that the transition is as much one of personal development and socialization as it is of biological change (Cao et al., 2023). However, unlike many other transitions that may involve adjustments to an established identity, motherhood calls for an integration of a new role,

changing a woman's sense of self in ways that can be both empowering and destabilizing (Seppälä et al., 2022). Although the shift to motherhood is inherently a complex process, it remains an underexplored area in academic literature, with studies on motherhood traditionally focusing on the role of mothers in child development, attachment, and well-being, often overlooking the mother's own experiences of identity change and adaptation.

Identity in Transition

The term "matrescence," popularized in the 20th century by Dana Louise Raphael, an anthropologist, and later explored in depth by Dr. Alexander Sacks, draws an important parallel between adolescence and the transition to motherhood (Athan, 2024). Both changes bring about a maturational crisis by instantly evoking all-encompassing changes. In the case of adolescence, Athan (2024) uses the phrase "Sturm und Drang," meaning storm and stress, to describe the intense emotions that adolescents experience. Akin to adolescence, the transition to motherhood is an incredibly disorganizing and disorienting period because the overall physiological, conceptual, affective, and behavioral traits, once used to define the self, undergo a physical, psychological, structural, and even relational metamorphosis.

This transition is neither cyclical nor linear; instead, it is characterized by moments of rebirth and dissolution. Typically, the transition to maternity roles challenges the notions of independence and self-worth that a woman previously held, triggering a re-evaluation of personal values, goals, and social relationships (Athan, 2024). Unlike adolescence and other developmental stages, the transition to motherhood is fully charged with media portrayals and social expectations as a source of joy, peace, and fulfillment, often neglecting the accompanying feelings of loss, tension, and ambivalence (Arnold-Baker, 2020). In particular, the "good mother" embodies a collection of high standards and perfectionist beliefs that

establish how mothers are expected to conduct themselves should they wish to be regarded as good mothers. Boshoff (2022) argues that for many new mothers, aligning themselves with this idealized image requires a renegotiation of self and often leads to feelings of inadequacy when the reality of motherhood does not align with these societal ideals.

Among the beliefs popularized by the "good mother" ideology include devoting one's entire mental and physical self to the newborn while at the same time being exceptional in personal and professional pursuits. Such beliefs create unrealistic and unattainable pressure on women and, if left unchecked, breed self-oriented perfectionism (Stickel et al., 2022). A culture that emphasizes perfectionism and unrealistic expectations can make shifting to motherhood difficult. Numerous studies have explored how perfectionist tendencies impact the well-being of mothers. In a sample of British women, Price et al. (2020) reported that levels of self-focused perfectionism and intolerance of uncertainty in women's social circles were related to negative judgments of maternity experiences. That is because the impossible-to-achieve social norms put intolerable pressure on mothers to fit an 'ideal' model of motherhood and discourage open discussion of the very mixed emotional reactions women feel during this transitional time.

Psychological Dimensions of Identity Transformation

Identity change in the transition to motherhood is a process that includes becoming a mother but also involves the psychological, physical, and social changes that occur in this life-transforming experience (Trussell et al., 2024). Adapting to these transformations goes beyond the surface-level changes of new responsibilities and routines; it profoundly influences a woman's self-perception, sense of worth, and well-being (Thompson et al., 2023). Usually, the shift from being centered on the self to a life that is centered on the newborn often brings about conflicting emotions, ranging from pride and fulfillment to grief

over the aspects of her previous self that may seem to recede (Zdolska-Wawrzkiwicz et al., 2020). This psychological adaptation depends on a host of factors such as personal wishes and beliefs, family pressures, societal norms, and, perhaps most critical, the amount of social support she is accorded.

The process of adjusting to maternal roles and responsibilities often involves an identity crisis. Many women find themselves grieving the loss of spontaneity and independence they enjoyed before parenthood; some feel confused about how to describe the experience of becoming a mother, and others feel like they have spent a significant amount of time caring for others at their own expense (Arnold-Baker, 2020). Such feelings commonly clash with the culturally sanctioned sentiments of satisfaction and happiness of motherhood. Laney et al. (2015) suggest that the identity crisis women encounter during their transition to motherhood arises from the conflict between the real experiences of motherhood and the ideals or expectations imposed by society. Trussell et al. (2024) mention that the entire scope of psychological transformations that women undergo during this transition is not something that a new mother, particularly a first-time mother, can be fully prepared for. Even with the knowledge that the transition is imminent, Babetin (2020) points out that the process can be agonizing and shocking.

To deal with the conflict in identity, new mothers need to learn to integrate their internalized ideals with the actual experiences of motherhood (Laney et al., 2015). New mothers feel guilty and resentful for their shortcomings if they fall short of integrating the two. According to Babetin (2020), the aspect that complicates the maternal identity crisis even further is the notion that new mothers should exclusively feel joyful and positive about their experience of becoming mothers and be the "good mothers" that are portrayed by society and the media. Laney et al. (2015) explain that it is natural for new mothers to experience initial confusion about mothering. Maternal confidence tends to grow gradually,

but those who continue to measure themselves against societal standards of a "good mother" are bound to feel tension over their shortcomings constantly (Whiley et al., 2021). Conversely, those women who adjust their intrapersonal norms concerning motherhood have a greater chance of developing a positive and fulfilling self-concept.

Most studies conducted about transitioning into motherhood have examined specific situations in isolation, such as social support as a protective factor or the impact of postpartum depression on mothers. While establishing this knowledge base has been useful, such research captures a fraction of the mothers' emotional experiences during the period in question. There is also a need to emphasize that while changes in a women's identity tend to be transformational, they also entail other emotions like ambivalence, nostalgia, and happiness laced with uncertainty. Recognizing these emotions as part of the transformational phase will aid in the understanding of maternal mental health from a more compassionate and non-judgemental perspective. The literature suggests that this is important for the survival of new mothers who are socio-culturally accustomed to a range of emotional responses as a promotion of mental strength. This broader perspective helps normalize motherhood's complexities and encourages open discussions about the varied experiences women face as they navigate their new roles.

Thematic Analysis of Identity Shifts in Motherhood

Redefinition of Self-Concept and Role Adjustment

Identity is the self-referencing description that answers the question 'Who am I?' with contextually relevant answers, which changes depending on the social groups that people belong too. In this way, the way a woman builds her identity is mediated and influenced by a plurality of discourses and ideologies (Williamson et al., 2023). Hennekam et al. (2019) show that while becoming a parent is typically portrayed as a happy and joyous time, it can also be

challenging to assume a new role and responsibility. This is because transitioning to motherhood lacks the societal recognition and support that typically accompany identity-forming stages, leaving many mothers feeling isolated or uncertain as they navigate their new identities.

Hennekam et al. (2019) maintain that identity is not stable and that redefining one's identity is not a linear process; instead, individuals experience identity transitions as a consequence of life events or changing roles. When life circumstances remain steady, the continuous process of developing and sometimes modifying one's sense of self-coherence and individuality usually takes place beneath conscious awareness (Maurer et al., 2023; Machirori, 2021). However, during impactful life events or significant transitions, people tend to become more aware of their identity, with the transition to motherhood being one of the most transformative experiences (Williamson et al., 2023), often leading to shifts in identity. In their new role as mothers, women often reshape their self-perception in alignment with the societal and cultural expectations surrounding both motherhood and their professional lives.

The process through which women redefine their identity in motherhood is multilayered. It requires them to integrate the new maternal roles and responsibilities with their previous identities, including their roles as professionals, friends, partners, and individuals with personal aspirations. The need to balance these competing roles can lead to what Net et al. (2024) call "identity conflict." Net et al. (2024) mention that the various roles women fulfill—such as mothers, wives, caregivers, and active participants in the workforce—do not follow a sequential path. Instead, they represent a concurrent blending of responsibilities, each accompanied by its own set of pressures and expectations. Herdiyanti (2018) describes a role as a flexible function shaped by social interactions and responsive to

various life circumstances, adapting as needed to suit contexts. Roles are closely tied to a person's social status, with specific expectations about how each role should be performed.

In theory, taking on multiple roles can lead to increased satisfaction through role completion; however, Net et al. (2024) report that this ideal is often unrealistic, and the demands of balancing numerous roles tend to lead to burnout rather than fulfillment. This is especially evident for mothers, as the shift to motherhood intensifies identity conflicts, forcing them to balance their maternal responsibilities alongside their existing roles and expectations (Machirori, 2021). The challenge of identity redefinition is more challenging for first-time mothers, as most may feel unable to meet their own expectations, let alone the idealized societal standards (Williamson et al., 2023). This stress can contribute to negative psychological outcomes such as low self-esteem, self-doubt, and guilt, especially when new mothers feel they are failing to meet the cultural ideal of the "perfect mother."

Across various cultures, there is a common perception that maternity comes easily and naturally to women, as if every mother instinctively knows how to nurture and care for her child. This view presumes maternal instincts will seamlessly guide women, minimizing emotional or practical challenges (Colomar et al., 2021). Such a perspective is, however, unnatural and highly demanding, as it fails to account for the distinct and complex experiences of many others who may feel unprepared or overwhelmed by this new role. According to Colomar et al. (2021), the fear of not attaining the cultural ideal of "the perfect mother" may push women to suppress aspects of their former selves in favor of a socially acceptable maternal role. This suppression increases the difficulty of role adjustment, forcing women to conform to external ideals rather than authentic self-fulfillment.

Psychological Theories on Identity Integration in Motherhood

From a psychological standpoint, theories such as Erikson's stages of psychological development suggest that significant life changes, like motherhood, naturally prompt individuals to reassess and restructure their self-concept (Erikson 1970). According to Erik Erikson, the psychological crises that mothers undergo result from the psychological needs of women (i.e., psycho) conflicting with the needs of society (i.e., social).

The most fundamental stage of Erickson's theory that reflects identity integration in motherhood is identity vs. confusion. Ideally, the identity versus role confusion stage is associated with adolescence but is also revisited as women enter motherhood (Kitchens & Abell, 2020). This stage is characterized by asking, "who am I?" and delving deeper into one's goals, virtues, and beliefs. To transition into their new roles, mothers must address a developmental conflict that facilitates the growth of key maternal virtues, enabling them to meet fresh responsibilities, expectations, and a unique sense of purpose (Zuhdi & Syauqillah, 2020). Role confusion, on the other hand, occurs when women feel uncertain or even fragmented as they attempt to balance their former selves with their new roles (Priest, 2021; Simmons et al., 2021). As an example, a woman who identifies with her career may find it quite challenging to reconcile her professional self with her new responsibilities as a mother, a phenomenon Erickson described as "role confusion." From the outset, the period of role confusion often presents as challenging (Kitchens & Abell, 2020); however, it can be an opportunity for growth as women re-evaluate their stories and integrate the maternal role into a broader, more concrete self-concept.

The sixth stage of Erickson's theory of psychosocial development—intimacy vs. isolation—also coincides with some women's transition to motherhood. This stage refers to the period when a person develops the ability to have intimate relationships with others while at the same time maintaining a sense of independence (Faraone, 2021). For new mothers, the demands of parenting necessitate a re-evaluation of their platonic and romantic relationships

through the lens of their new identity (i.e., motherhood). A woman's sense of identity during this stage may lead to lesser or greater commitment, which manifests itself in boundaries that new mothers establish with others to protect their identity and emotional well-being (Sidesinger, 2024). Additional responsibilities and duties that motherhood brings can significantly strain relationships, leading to some women experiencing a sense of isolation (Sidesinger, 2024). Simmons et al. (2021) argue that the magnitude to which new mothers feel isolated can be exacerbated if they feel their role is misunderstood or undervalued by those around them. As a result, the intimacy vs. isolation conflict emerges, compelling mothers to forge and maintain relationships that support their evolving identity as caregivers.

Generativity vs. stagnation, which is the seventh stage of Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, is also central to motherhood (Erikson, 1970). At its core, it takes place in middle adulthood, where individuals prioritize their personal development through professional achievements, societal contributions, and family involvement (Millová et al., 2021). As Erickson describes, generativity encompasses deep care for others and a wish to leave a meaningful legacy for those who come after us – qualities inherently aligned with motherhood (Nantais & Stack, 2020). While some mothers may find immense fulfillment and a sense of identity in their new generative role of caregiving, others may feel that their identity has been overshadowed or narrowed solely to that of a "mother." Nantais and Stack (2020) warn that when individuals fail to achieve a sense of generativity, they may experience stagnation – a state of disconnection from the larger social fabric. The feelings of being unproductive and uninvolved often lead to self-absorption, emptiness, and lack of growth.

In navigating these stages, motherhood becomes a transformative experience and a catalyst for deeper self-discovery and personal growth. Being able to synthesize pre-existing aspects of identity with new roles ultimately leads to what Erikson refers to as "redefined

self." As the term infers, the 'redefined self' is a state that successfully integrates motherhood as a meaningful part of the larger identity matrix, wherein the successful negotiation of each psychosocial conflict enriches the individual, leading to a more expansive understanding of the self (Erikson, 1970).

Personal Agency in Identity Formation

Amidst the challenges associated with redefining their self-concept, mothers exercise personal agency to reshape their identity in authentic and meaningful ways. Personal agency, at the core, refers to the capacity of an individual to deliberately and effectively change events or the immediate environment (Babetin, 2020). While this definition may sound simple, agency is a deep-reaching concept that has profound implications on one's life as it relates to the power relevant to self-expression and self-actualization. Edgely (2021) emphasizes that understanding one's agency is one of the most important forms of personal growth during motherhood, as personal agency enables mothers to pursue a balanced identity that acknowledges both their caregiving roles and their individual goals.

Having personal agency during the transition to motherhood hinges on self-reflection. From a psychological perspective, self-reflection is the ability to witness and assess one's emotional, behavioral, and cognitive processes (Said et al., 2024). When individuals take the time to communicate with themselves and think about their character internally, they are better positioned to analyze and understand the drivers of certain behavior, where it emanates from, and the outcome of the behavior and its implications. Through this process, women can examine which parts of their identity feel authentic to them and which feel externally imposed (Raneberg & MacCallum, 2024). For example, the pressure to be the ideal mother –

caring, self-sacrificing, and providing consistent nurturing – will likely keep mothers locked into a narrowly defined role that overlooks their needs, goals, and individual identities (Simmons et al., 2021). This idealized image tends to stifle personal agency, as others feel compelled to suppress aspects of their desires, personalities, and career ambitions to fit societal expectations. The conscious exercise of self-reflection can go a long way to helping mothers gain clarity of thought and make informed decisions on the best possible way to balance their maternal identity with other facets of their self-concept.

Social support is another very important part of personal agency in identity reformation. Loehr (2022) writes that 'relations that are emotionally supportive contribute to increased feelings of agency.' That, in turn, enhances general feelings of control, which helps to promote psychological well-being. Persson and Hostler's (2021) study shows that women who exercise personal agency are freer to act in ways that serve their own interests and perform self-affirming tasks when they are accorded the necessary support. The study's authors suggest that social support gives the individual the material and moral means to exercise agency. This allows mothers to step away from, without neglecting, their caregiving roles and engage in activities that promote personal growth (Loehr, 2022). This support can come in various forms, such as partners who share in caregiving responsibilities, access to affordable childcare, or friends who provide emotional validation.

The Complexity of Emotional Experiences Beyond Postpartum Depression

In the healthcare landscape of today, the transition to motherhood is already experiencing a growing recognition of maternal mental health. On a global scale, around 10% of expectant mothers and 13% of new mothers are dealing with mental health concerns, notably PPD, as well as heightened levels of stress and anxiety (WHO, 2023). In developing countries, the prevalence of mental health issues is even higher, accounting for 15.56%

during pregnancy and 19.8% after giving birth (WHO, 2023). While PPD is undoubtedly a part of women's experiences, it represents only a fraction of the complex emotional landscape that often accompanies the journey to motherhood (Hwang et al., 2022). Recent literature on maternal psychology suggests that, beyond clinical symptoms, new mothers experience a complex emotional spectrum that includes ambivalence, anxiety, and self-discovery, all of which are rooted in the shifting dynamics of their identity and role within their personal and social spheres.

The transition to becoming a mother is also characterized by a strong psychological component that influences the emotional experience of early motherhood (Shloim, 2020; Net et al., 2024). Shloim (2020) goes on to explain that during this stage of life, a woman experiences a great deal of self-discrepancy due to three main factors: (1) social comparison, (2) one's personal self-concept, and (3) the framing of that self-concept. These core influences go hand in hand with the emotions that mothers possess, ranging from happiness to sadness to guilt and confusion, which may cause cognitive dissonance for new mothers dealing with concepts of self that are internally contradictory (Net et al., 2024). Most of the time also, the coexisting identities of the presumed self and the maternal self that are taking shape within the individual further complicate the early stages of motherhood, making it imperative to consider the context of the development of maternal identity differently from the conventional frameworks.

Examining the phenomenology of mothering, Arnold-Baker (2020) includes a quotation in which one of the participants describes her experiences as disorienting and transforming at the same time: "It is like being hit by a train but in a good way." Such a metaphor serves to emphasize the conflicting feelings that are often caused by the experience: they are fierce but motivating, excessive but enhancing. Arnold-Baker (2023) and Finlayson et al. (2020) also add that while enabling, motherhood also creates an internal turmoil that is

disabling in the sense that it calls for radical and traumatic adjustment of one's life. New mothers often experience a "dual identity" where they maintain parts of their former self, while incorporating the responsibilities and expectations of motherhood (Kim, 2020). For example, a woman's desire for self-care, social engagement, and career pursuit often conflicts with the expectation that a mother should be fully self-sacrificing and focused on her child. This tension between personal ambitions and societal expectations intensifies the emotional complexity of the identity shift (Net et al., 2024). It can exacerbate feelings of self-doubt and guilt, especially when mothers struggle to meet these high standards.

Motherhood and Social Relations

The transition to motherhood is significantly shaped by social support and interpersonal relationships. In particular, the way mothers perceive and integrate their new identity is often based on the quality and availability of support from partners, family, friends, role models, and broader social networks (Williamson et al., 2023). One of the most defining relationships as women transition to motherhood is that with her partner. The effect of partner support is so critical and important in that it has the capacity to reduce the negative effects of a traumatic birth or boost the woman's ability to breastfeed (Shorey & Wong, 2022). This does not discredit the social support family members, friends, and healthcare professionals provide. Yu et al. (2021) suggests that the support provided by partners on an emotional level has the most significant impact on reducing the likelihood of postnatal depression. Therefore, the support that the partner accords the mother needs to extend beyond practical help with childcare and everyday chores and include emotional support such as listening with empathy, encouragement, and input into childbearing.

In stark contrast, relationships with limited or lack of partner support can amplify feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, and frustration, as new mothers may struggle to balance

the demands of motherhood and their own personal needs (Raneberg & MacCallum, 2024). Social relationships usually undergo significant changes and adaptation during the transition to parenthood. When the partners become parents, it becomes imperative for the partners to adjust to their new identities of "a mother" and "a father." According to Yu et al. (2021), adjusting to these new roles means less time for leisure activities, less time as a couple, and negotiating different values and priorities about childrearing and family, which partners never realized they held previously. Kuipers et al. (2020) conducted an individually matched case-control cohort study whereby more than half of the respondents – in this case, new mothers – reported feeling more dissatisfied with their relationships compared to childless women even a year after the baby was born. They attributed the feelings of dissatisfaction to the unequal division of childcare and household duties that often follow.

When new mothers are forced to bear the primary responsibility for childcare, they become more susceptible to an identity shift that center predominantly around being a mother, often at the expense of other roles and aspirations. This can lead to what Piotrowski (2023) refers to as "identity foreclosure," where the mother's identity is prematurely limited to the maternal role due to societal or relationship pressures. The time a person used to have to themselves before taking on maternal roles is now filled with tasks that never seem to stop (Finlayson et al., 2020). Mothers who experience this form of identity foreclosure typically do not seek or respond to social support or act in ways that nurture their emerging new identities (Piotrowski et al., 2024). Consequently, they end up struggling to build healthy relationships with others. Without the much-needed social support from partners, family, and friends, identity foreclosure may make the activities, goals, and relationships once valued before motherhood feel distant, creating a sense of disconnection from the self they once knew (Sabti Samarah et al., 2024). Identity foreclosure can lead to feelings of loss, grief, and

even resentment as they perceive that motherhood has forced them to abandon aspects of themselves that once brought fulfillment and purpose.

In addition to support from partners, the other community and social aspects, including additional parenting health services and support groups, shape a mother's self-concept (Garcia-Lorenzo et al., 2023). Community resources assist mothers in experiencing connectedness and alleviating the feeling of loneliness, as well as enabling interaction with people who share similar experiences of motherhood (Villatte et al., 2022). Budds (2021) shows that when communities accept the role of a mother and offer practical and emotional support, it enhances the mother's positive image.

The significance of role models while moving into motherhood is well-known and recognized as vital (Hennekam et al., 2019). This is even more so in the case of new mothers, as these role models provide them with other females who have faced the same challenges regarding maternal identity. Also, Hennekam et al. (2019) shows that role models provide information and support for new mothers as well as encouragement. The importance of other people who serve as role models to encourage a mother during this turbulent phase of life corresponds with the concept of self-efficacy, which has been shown to correlate positively with a mother's belief in her competence, her ability to withstand difficulties, and her ability to perform new tasks (Kearney & Levine, 2020). Lastly, the presence of positive role models capable of managing the different elements of motherhood leads one to believe that she, too, will be able to do so, thus building a positive maternal identity.

Maternal Discourses and Ideologies

The mothers' experiences are significantly influenced by the culture and society in which they live. Collins (2019), Laney et al. (2015), and Sidesinger (2024) agree that the numerous messages and cultural images that confront new mothers greatly shape their

understanding and can affect their well-being and self-identity. Under societal pressure, new mothers often grapple with the gap between the "ideal mother" image and the realities of motherhood (Paterson et al., 2018). Research shows that when there is a considerable difference between how a woman views herself as a mother and her ideal of motherhood, she is more likely to experience mental health difficulties, with postpartum depression being particularly prominent (Collins, 2019). Mothers also must navigate their relationship with varied motherhood discourses, such as intensive mothering and familism. These worldviews, together with the question of maternal identity, generate tensions in discourse during the transition to motherhood.

Motherhood is known to commence with pregnancy and childbirth; however, the act of mothering occurs when the child is born. Specifically, Laney et al. (2015) observe that women tend to go through a very swift change that is viewed as transformative, particularly during the phase referred to as postpartum. Many women report feeling as though they still share their bodies with their babies long after childbirth. Alongside these complex feelings, caring for a newborn's physical and emotional demands can be overwhelming (Zdolska-Wawrzkiwicz et al., 2020). If the society they live in devalue care work, mothers may face the added burden of providing constant care without the necessary supports, intensifying their challenges.

In addition to adopting the new roles, the women's sense of self as a mother is also shaped by the broader social context and cultural expectations of motherhood. The concept of intensive mothering is prevalent in many Western cultures, highlighting a societal expectation that mothers should selflessly devote extensive time and effort to nurturing their children (Verniers et al., 2022). This viewpoint emphasizes that mothers must take charge of every little detail of their parenting to promote their children's happiness. Cucchiara and Steinbugler (2021) suggest that the practice of intensive mothering demands considerable diligence in

gathering and interpreting knowledge to inform a mother's choices and guide her child's actions. This ideology is based on essentialist beliefs in women's natural parenting abilities, the view of parenting as a fulfilling endeavor, the acknowledgment of its inherent challenges, the need for children's cognitive stimulation, and a child-centered approach that respects the unique needs and natural rhythms of each child (Garcia-Lorenzo et al., 2023; Minnotte, 2023). For many mothers, internalization and strictly adhering to the ideals of intensive mothering lead to pressure and inadequacy as they navigate the often unexpected emotional, physical, and social changes accompanying motherhood (Verniers et al., 2022). Consequently, mothers might be driven to mask negative feelings or difficulties, therefore feeding the belief that any departure from the pristine image of motherhood is an individual shortcoming, not the reality of this life phase.

In addition to being mothers, society expects women to be able to do it all whether in the domestic sphere or outside the home. According to Verniers et al. (2022), the transition into motherhood comes with the contradictory impact of two schemas for women — (1) devotion to family and (2) devotion to work. On the one hand, devotion to the family schemas means that mothers are expected to prioritize family over anything else in their lives, including their personal interests. According to the work schema, women must invest their effort within the professional context (Rodriguez Castro et al., 2020). The problem of two competing roles creates an inordinate guilt, powerlessness, and helplessness among mothers since one cannot fully realize any one of the expectations of carrying such responsibilities. In trying to cope with these demands and seeking to balance these opposing pressures, many women often arrive at pragmatic solutions about childrearing and employment and actively adjust their beliefs about being mothers (Bhaumik & Sahu, 2021).

Identification and Discussion of Gaps in the Literature

Even though the transition to motherhood has been previously studied for many decades, several gaps remain. These gaps are partly due to a longstanding cultural and scientific focus on child developmental outcomes, leaving the mother's identity shifts relatively unexplored. One of the key areas where current literature on the transition to motherhood is lacking is the focus on subjective and interpretive dimensions of maternal identity formation. The framework of transition to motherhood has not been explored through the lens of a lifeworld research approach and phenomenological-hermeneutic qualitative method. This approach would offer a more profound understanding of the lived experiences of mothers, allowing for a deeper exploration of how they interpret and make meaning of their transition to motherhood. Unlike more traditional methods, a phenomenological-hermeneutic approach focuses on the subjective experiences of individuals and how these experiences are shaped by their everyday worlds, thus providing insights into the emotional, existential, and relational dimensions of motherhood.

In addition, most studies on maternal identity are cross-sectional, providing snapshots of the transition to motherhood at isolated points in time. Identity in motherhood is a dynamic process that is influenced by a wide range of factors, such as evolving relationships with children, changes in career or life goals, and the aging of both mother and child. The absence of long-term studies limits our understanding of how maternal identity shifts across different stages and circumstances, including the redefinition of self as children gain independence.

Ongoing research on the transition to motherhood also presumes a homogenous experience in motherhood. Homogeneity within research has its pitfalls and challenges. Some are related to the underrepresentation of certain groups or populations and the generalization of results to other broader groups. For instance, single mothers, as well as mothers brought up in arrangements like non-traditional families, may be subjected to specific identity politics and dynamics that most studies fail to cover. Additionally, the motherhood narratives and the

intrinsic cultural pressures related to becoming a mother are not universal and vary between communities. These social constructs largely influence a woman's identity at the time of becoming a mother, as well as the inhibitions that she may experience while easing into motherhood. In the quest for a better understanding, it is important that research incorporates different groups of people and considers the effects of different cultures, societies, and economies on the changes in maternal identities.

Ethical Considerations in Research on Maternity

The formulation of maternal identity has an extreme sensitivity characterized by ethical issues of concern, and this makes research in this area significantly important. Conducting research in this area must comply with the general principles of ethical and social norms and additional regional guidelines that control the viewpoints of the subjects, their autonomy, and their diversity.

First, maternal identity research must be carried out according to the legal frameworks that govern research involving human beings, considering that identity transformation is a personal issue. The Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans focuses on autonomy, informed consent, benefits, and significant principles in doing research, especially those dealing with issues as sensitive as being a mother. Ensuring that one of the requirements of informed consent is the participant's comprehension of the purpose and methods of the study as well as the intended use of the data, it becomes clear that autonomy must also be protected by informed consent.

While many studies selected for the literature review adhered to the ethical guidelines set by the CPA (2017) and CAP (2019), there were some notable exceptions. Arnold-Baker (2019), Babetin (2020) and Simmons et al. (2021), failed to indicate that informed consent

was given to participants in the studies. As a result, it is unknown if there were proper steps taken to protect the participants and their confidentiality during the study.

Maternal identity is also shaped by individual psychological processes and cultural and societal influences. This renders cultural competence imperative for any ethical research conducted in the field. Scholars must, therefore, make every attempt to incorporate ethics in their study by understanding and honoring the cultures, beliefs, and practices of the people they study. Maternal identity is defined by cultural expectations on gender roles, composition of families, and mothers. Failure to acknowledge these cultural differences may result in the distortion of the interpretation of the results, thus marginalizing individuals whose experiences do not fit the hegemonic definition of motherhood in the culture. Moreover, ethical research in this area requires an understanding of intersectionality, acknowledging that experiences of motherhood may be further complicated by factors such as race, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation. By approaching research with cultural sensitivity, researchers can produce more accurate and applicable findings reflected across diverse populations.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS) on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans emphasizes the importance of respect for participants, fairness, and the mitigation of potential harms. When compensation is not offered to participants, ethical considerations arise, particularly regarding fairness and voluntariness. The TCPS underscores that participation must be free from coercion or undue influence, and the lack of compensation should not exploit vulnerable individuals or discourage equitable participation. Researchers must ensure that participants are fully informed about the absence of compensation during the consent process and that the study's design upholds principles of justice, distributing burdens and benefits of research fairly. Additionally, researchers should consider whether compensation, even minimal, might enhance accessibility and inclusivity without

compromising voluntariness, reflecting a commitment to the ethical principles outlined in the TCPS.

In the study conducted by Raudasoja et al., (2022), it was indicated that participants would not be compensated for their participation. The absence of compensation for research participants can have significant ethical and practical implications. From an ethical standpoint, it may raise concerns about fairness and justice, as individuals are asked to contribute their time, effort, or personal information without tangible acknowledgment. This can disproportionately impact marginalized or lower-income groups, who may be unable to afford unpaid participation, thereby limiting diversity and inclusivity in research. As the research focused on new mothers who are already navigating changes in their identity and relationships while also having to care for a newborn, not providing compensation for time may be considered unfair and unjust. It is understood that woman transitioning to motherhood may be juggling competing priorities, including their own self-care, therefore not offering compensation upholds intensive mothering ideals that a mother must be selfless, and her time is not valued.

The lack of compensation can also impede recruitment efforts, reducing the pool of willing participants and potentially skewing study results by favoring those who can afford to participate without financial incentives. Additionally, the absence of compensation may be perceived as undervaluing participants' contributions, potentially leading to mistrust or reluctance to engage in future research. Researchers must weigh these impacts carefully and consider whether offering compensation could foster equity, respect, and broader participation while maintaining ethical standards of voluntariness.

Chapter 4: Application to Clinical Practice

The central focus of this chapter is to apply the insights gained from the literature review to clinical practice. Essentially, this chapter translates theoretical knowledge into actionable strategies to support health professionals, especially those working with women transitioning into motherhood. Establishing the connection between theory and practice is essential because it demonstrates a proper understanding of the key concepts and informs future practice. The strength of connecting the insights gained from the previous chapters highlights the evidence of critical thinking and growth in understanding the complexities of maternal identity transformation.

Integration of Findings into Clinical Practice

Validating Diverse Emotional Responses to Motherhood

Integrating the findings from Chapter 3 on the transition to motherhood offers clinicians actionable insights into the complex psychological, social, and cultural dynamics shaping maternal identity. As Kuipers et al. (2021) mentioned, the transition to motherhood is an evolving experience that fundamentally alters a woman's sense of self and impacts her life trajectory. The neurohormonal changes that occur during pregnancy, birth, and postpartum

periods can disrupt a woman's sense of self, leading to a temporary loss of her previous identity (Servin-Barthet., 2023). During this process, a substantial number of women attempt to find an equilibrium in new or renewed motherhood. Finding this equilibrium is, however, not an instantaneous shift; instead, it is a process that takes place during the early stages of pregnancy up to two years postpartum or even longer (Kuipers et al., 2021). It is through a process of adjustment and deliberation that an individual's previously established self-perceptions are transformed into a revitalized sense of identity.

Recognizing and addressing these dynamics within clinical practice can significantly enhance therapeutic support for mothers. The epicenter of integrating the insights gained from the literature review is understanding that the transition to motherhood involves a broad spectrum of emotions, not just the culturally celebrated feelings of joy and fulfillment. Dr. Brizendine, the author of *The Female Brain*, writes, "Motherhood changes you because it literally alters a woman's brain structurally, functionally, and in many ways, irreversibly" (Babetin, 2020). It is an experience that engages every modality of being, bringing about physical changes, shift in status, transitioning to a higher level of consciousness, and a spiritual unfolding. The change from a woman to a mother is the most profound psychologically among all these domains. Babetin (2020) mentions that this psychological transformation is not something a new mother can ever be truly prepared for. Even for primiparous and multigravida women, the identity transformation can be shocking and agonizing. This explains why many women find themselves feeling lost and uncertain about who they are at a time when society expects them embracing their role as the self-sacrificing and attentive mother.

Simmons et al. (2021). Hwang et al. (2022) and Seppälä et al. (2021) found that mothers often experience guilt, frustration, ambivalence, and grief as they navigate the complexities of their evolving identity. Healthcare professionals can help normalize these

emotions, explaining that they are common responses to significant life changes and offering a safe space for mothers to express them without judgment (McSorley et al., 2022).

Motherhood poses numerous emotional, cognitive, and social challenges to the mother herself. Psychological conflicts surrounding the transition to motherhood may have implications for the development of a cohesive self and, therefore, may be detrimental to regulating one's emotions and the mental health of the mothers in question (Crocetti et al., 2023). Moreover, the stress is further compounded by the societal expectations of perfection in every sphere of motherhood without regard for personal challenges that one might face and lack of any social support or safety net, which can lead to chronic stress, anxiety, and even postpartum depression. The silent crisis about maternal identity, compounded by the stigma of admitting that motherhood is anything less than fulfilling, not only affects mothers but can also ripple through the fabric of families and the broader society.

To mitigate these adverse effects, clinicians should have awareness and education of matrescence and the accompanying identity shifts that occur in new motherhood in order to support their clients with the range of emotions new mothers may have. This includes having a concrete understanding of the momentous transformation new mothers go through and being able to normalize the full spectrum of emotions without pathologizing or marginalizing their clients. Clinicians should assist women as they make this huge transition in incorporating every aspect of their new role, including any discomfort and unease the transition may bring (Raneberg & MacCallum, 2024). There are several approaches that clinicians, in particular therapists, can use to help others identify and process these emotions. One of the methods that therapists can use is emotion-focused therapy (EFT), developed on the premise that an individual's identity is interwoven with their emotions (Ansar, 2022). Identifying and accepting the different feelings and emotions that new mothers may experience regarding motherhood is of utmost importance in minimizing excessive self-

condemnation and internal stigma. Furthermore, cognitive behavioral theory (CBT) can help therapists guide mothers in recognizing perfectionistic thinking and cognitive distortions related to the 'good mother' ideal (Ryan, 2020). CBT might help mothers to question the negative assumptions that are reinforced by such ideologies and to put in their place assumptions more aligned with their present experiences. These approaches can help mothers develop a more flexible way of thinking about their experiences and beliefs and, in this way, enable them to develop more achievable expectations.

Identity Exploration and Reintegration

It has been noted that an accompanying change in identity for women is featured prominently in the literature addressing the transition to motherhood. Mothering, at times, may conflict with a woman's existing concept of self, and reconciliation of such tensions within a clinical context calls for proactive participation of mothers in identity reconstruction, understanding that she is a mother but also a person with values, needs, and goals. For instance, the changes associated with one's professional role during motherhood help understand the constant narrative and the minor shifts occurring in the cross-domain identity narrative that women have over time.

One of these identity shifts happens in the sphere of work identities. Hennekam et al. (2021) examined those social and organizational assumptions that shape the extent to which identity negotiation occurs in the transition to motherhood. They reported that if they could access societal support and role models of women successfully combining family and work, they were more confident in adjusting their own roles (Hennekam et al., 2021). These mothers exhibited a growing accommodation and assimilation of a maternal identity as they moved forward through motherhood. At the same time, the absence of social support and role models disrupted their future role as mothers, resulting in a 'wait-and-see' attitude throughout

the transition period (Hennekam et al., 2021). Hennekam also found that the perception of incompatibility between the pre-existing self-concept and the new maternal roles leads to feelings of stress and uncertainty. The conflict between a woman's pre-existing self-concept and future maternal identity was especially pronounced among highly educated women and those with a strong commitment to their professional aspirations.

Healthcare professionals can draw from these findings to facilitate meaningful identity work in clinical practice. For example, therapists might encourage women transitioning to motherhood to reflect on their pre-maternal and emerging identities, exploring how these roles may coexist (Levine, 2023). This could involve guided journaling prompts such as, "What parts of my work identity do I want to carry into motherhood?" or "Who are my role models for working mothers, and what can I learn from them?" Therapeutic interventions, such as narrative therapy, can go a long way toward allowing mothers to explore and redefine their stories, helping them see themselves as whole persons whose identities are enriched rather than overshadowed by motherhood (Maxwell & Leat, 2022). At its core, narrative therapy emphasizes the power of storytelling, reforming one's identity, and using personal narratives to shape one's lived experiences (LCMHCA, 2022). Most researchers agree that motherhood brings forth a profound shift in women's identity. The transition to motherhood does not occur seamlessly; instead, mothers may experience a sense of loss or struggle to reconcile their new maternal role with their pre-motherhood self. In such cases, clinicians can utilize narrative therapy to create a supportive environment where mothers can explore and make sense of these changes (LCMHCA, 2022). This therapeutic approach allows mothers to recognize the values and characteristics they wish to carry forward, helping them find continuity and connection between who they were and who they are becoming.

Laney et al. (2015) describe how developing a maternal identity requires women to navigate societal expectations and cultural norms that dictate how motherhood should be experienced. Women are often pressured to embody a societal "good mother" ideal that celebrates only the positive aspects of motherhood. Laney et al. (2015) argue that these images influence how women form their motherhood identities. When they feel they do not measure up to these standards, mothers may experience self-blame and guilt. Thus, incorporating a maternal role becomes a balancing act between societal ideals and individual experiences of motherhood.

In this manner, clinicians can employ narrative therapy as a vehicle for the women, even those who have complied with the norms, and encourage reframing the situation to identify their needs. By listening to and validating their narratives, women can counter the call for uniformity and design motherhood congruent with their ethos and aspirations (LCMHCA, 2022). Other strategies clinicians may employ include self-compassion, mindfulness-based therapies including (MBSR) training focusing on new mothers learning to treat themselves kindly (Fernades et al., 2022). By helping mothers understand that the "perfect mother" ideal is a social construct, clinicians can support them in developing a more realistic and self-compassionate view of motherhood.

Impact of Research Findings on Clinical Application

The literature review on the transition to motherhood has underscored that the transition to motherhood is not solely characterized by attachment bonding or fulfillment but also involves a complex re-evaluation of self-identity, roles, and relationships. The multifaceted changes in a woman's life during this transition can trigger introspection and identity reformation. This often requires mothers to reassess their internalized perceptions of motherhood and their identities in relation to others (Machirori, 2021). In addition, the

transition to motherhood causes women to alter or lose much of their pre-motherhood self-concept. The transition into motherhood, therefore, compels women to reflect on every aspect of their being and define their identities in ways that differ from their lives before motherhood.

The understanding of the fact that maternal health hinges on the re-evaluation of women's identity and traditional concerns of PPD to encompass broader identity challenges emphasizes the need for approaches that validate and explore diverse emotional experiences new mothers encounter. From a clinical practice perspective, research highlights the importance of providing mothers with space to discuss and make sense of the identity changes they are experiencing without feeling pressure to conform to socially idealized versions of motherhood (Sidesinger, 2024). By validating feelings of ambivalence and the full spectrum of emotions associated with maternal identity, clinicians can foster an environment where mothers feel safe to express themselves fully, which can be a powerful component of the therapeutic process.

Legislative measures that surround maternal rights, access to healthcare, and parental support have a direct impact on maternal health and the reformation of maternal identity. In countries with supportive maternity leave policies, mothers generally have more time to acclimate to their new identities before resuming pre-existing roles. In nations where long maternity leaves are extremely highly valued (for example, for women in Canada, Norway or Scandinavian countries, where maternity leaves extend up to one year and are paid at a certain percentage of the full salary), the mothers are allowed enough time to fully engage in this work as mothers without the immediate engagement to fulfill any prior work-related roles. This encourages a more satisfied and healthy fitting of the 'maternal role' into oneself.

On the contrary, countries with laws that have shorter leave increase identity conflict. In the American context, for instance, one can apply for an FMLA leave, where the primary caregiver is allowed only twelve weeks in a calendar year (Donovan, 2020). It is a result of such gestation periods that most women begin office duties even earlier and still under circumstances that compel them to balance work and care for their newborns (Paterson et al., 2018). Such limitations can result in an inconsistent self-identity, enhancing internal struggles. In this regard, practitioners in the field need to be knowledgeable about these rights and provisions to support mothers in understanding their feelings of safety and stability at the workplace. This way, they can assist mothers in advocating their interests by equipping them for negotiations regarding their place of work and employers about certain adjustments like additional leaves and flexible working hours.

Cultural and societal norms also play a powerful role in shaping a mother's sense of self, identity, and equilibrium between home and work environments. These issues have been investigated for many years, examining the changing lives of mothers in the private, social, and cultural spheres. According to Baker (2018), the notion of intensive mothering—rooted in feminist perspectives—demands that mothers invest considerable time and energy in their parenting efforts. This way of mothering operates from the premise that the 'best' mothers are those who put their children's needs before their own personal desires, goals, and aspirations (Athan, 2024). The practice of intensive mothering evolves to be a form of social control that may stigmatize women who refuse to adhere to the ideology. If such norms are upheld, they can lead to conflicts among mothers whose personal convictions diverge from these expectations. Health professionals are advised to create an environment where mothers will be able to speak about these norms critically, helping clients choose applicable cultural norms that fit their values and purposes. In group therapy sessions attended by mothers from different ethnicities and backgrounds, professionals can promote cultural understanding by

initiating conversations with cultural context and experience specific to every member. This is beneficial because there is an exchange of ideas, which helps mothers appreciate different aspects of maternal identity and the acceptable way this may change over time.

Recommendations for Clinical Practice

Theoretical Model for Maternal Identity Transformation

Considering the lessons learned from matricentric feminist theory, clinicians may use this framework by assisting new mothers with their evolving identity. Matricentric theory is based on the premise that motherhood is an all-encompassing and very crucial aspect in the lives of women that defines their self-concept, relationships, and societal position (O'Reilly, 2019). This theory extends the scope of feminism by ensuring that developing empowering women theories is based on the needs and problems of mothers. In this sense, matricentric feminist theory strongly emphasizes maternal identity being treated as a unique experience with its own set of problems, understanding, and rewards.

The matricentric theory can be implemented by targeting the mother's personal growth. The practitioners may play a role in facilitating activities that delve into the aspects of the clients' identities that may be changing, such as how a woman sees herself after becoming a mother and what her ambitions and values have become. It has been demonstrated that one of the initial phases of becoming a mother for women entails merging the existing image with the new image of being a mother (Garcia-Lorenzo et al., 2023). Many mothers suffer from this internal conception of who they were before and who they are currently. These changes in mothers' identities can be explored using guided self-reflection exercises. To better comprehend the the process of change and help the individual incorporate new elements of the self, methods such as narrative therapy, where the client creates a timeline of their lives, and journaling can be used.

In addition to aligning the past with the present, the societal context also contributes largely to the construction of maternal identity. The cultural practices and the images in the media that set certain standards of an 'exemplary' mother lead to cognitive dissonance among those who do not fit the ideal images. (Seppälä et al., 2021). Thus, matricentric feminism would suggest to therapists that they look at the influence of society's expectations of mothers on their self-worth and how these affect their choices, as this will help the clients redefine motherhood. Therapists can ask mothers to visualize a more genuine aspect of themselves as mothers without the values of society. Such a model promotes self-reliance in developing an individual's identity by appreciating that the mother's values and choices are important and applicable.

Chapter 5: Recommendations and Conclusion

Conclusion and Summary of the Study

The concept of motherhood and the influence it has on women was the central theme of this study in regard to a matricentric feminist theory. This literature review has shown the transition to motherhood is a time in which mothers' identities undergo the most radical changes. In contrast to traditional studies, which usually consider the mother-child relationship in detail, this review extends the focus to the implications on the mothers themselves, where societal pressures, changes in relations, and reconfiguration of personal identity influence the mothers.

The central premise of the current study is that the transition in the concept of maternal role is determined by several factors that are not only dependent on the individual but also exist outside the individual within the environment. Identity tension is the first component of this transition which refers to the feeling that the pre-maternal images of self do not even correspond to the individuals' culture and society (Simmons et al., 2021). For many women, there is a dissonance between how they see themselves and the expectations of them as mothers, so they assert that motherhood develops extraneous duties that interfere with their core self (Hwang et al., 2022).

Additionally, entering motherhood poses problems as mothers deal with the conception of selfless and obedient mothers in addition to the concept of intensive mothering, which may run contrary to their aims and self-image (Trussel et al., 2024). This study

demonstrates that maternal identity is a dynamic process, and that instead of seamlessly sliding into maternal roles devoid of challenges, many women undergo a phase of disorientation, loss, and cognitive dissonance in a bid to fit into their new role as mothers. In this sense, the study highlights that the transition to motherhood is not a one-off experience, but rather a developmental process that is multi-faceted, transformational, and ongoing.

The key takeaway from this review is that transitioning to motherhood is a transformative journey characterized by significant shifts in personal identity. The transition to motherhood furthers identity changes, particularly because, during this stage, women are faced with the realities of new maternal roles in juxtaposition with their and societal ideals of motherhood (Raudasoja, 2023). Identifying as a mother and developing a motherhood identity, according to Laney et al. (2015), involves integrating internalized ideals about how women believe they ought to mother with the lived reality of motherhood. Falling short of meeting this ideal is associated with feelings of guilt and blame on mothers. Embracing the matricentric feminist approach and the maternity identity transformation model allows mothers and clinicians alike to validate the complex experiences due to motherhood (O'Reilly, 2019). By supporting mothers in navigating these identity shifts, healthcare providers can help achieve greater self-awareness, emotional resilience, and empowerment. In a similar vein, society and policy-makers must acknowledge that mothers' needs are as complex and deserving of support as the developmental needs of their children.

Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

The transition to motherhood, particularly the identity transformation that accompanies this phase, remains an understudied area with substantial potential for further exploration. Longitudinal studies investigating the temporal unfolding of maternal identity across the life course would be enormously valuable for future research and practice. The first

phase of transitioning into motherhood involves dramatic shifts in identity, but maternal identity continues to develop beyond postpartum and as mothers enter different life phases. Tracing this evolution over time would provide valuable insights into how mothers' sense of self adapts, fluctuates, or solidifies. Studies could investigate whether the initial identity upheavals settle down, whether later challenges trigger more change, and how social norms shape the process over decades.

Future research should also prioritize cultural diversity, investigating how mothers from different backgrounds experience and interpret identity shifts. Fundamentally, cultural diversity is a belief system that values and enhances cultural practices and existence of people from different groups (Schmidt et al., 2023). Thus, all these factors – cultural, economic, geographical or otherwise, may play a significant role in defining as well as re-defining a woman's maternal identity (Chhetri, 2024). For example, incorporating mothers from the 'marginalized' population such as low-income mothers, unmarried mothers, or mothers from ethnic minority groups could present different aspects of challenges and resolution strategies towards identity development. Future studies should account for the convergence of cultural beliefs and practices as well, enriching the understanding of maternal identities.

Also, incorporating the idea of therapy focused on the mother into clinical practice should be encouraged. Maternal-centered care is the tendency to design maternity care services from the perspective of women to improve their health and experiences during maternal care (Nagineviciute et al., 2023). It is part of patient-oriented care, which highlights the need for respect and equality between healthcare providers and women. Therapeutic models should address issues of identity, self-conception and personal development in relation to motherhood (Nagineviciute et al., 2023). This strategy could greatly assist mothers in approaching and assimilating their changing selves. Instead of considering identity crises as struggles that must be overcome, maternal-focused therapy, for example, can understand

them as healthy changes in development. This encourages mothers to embrace change, as they can view motherhood and the changes in identity as development which is important in enhancing oneself.

Moreover, future studies should utilize mixed-methods research for holistic insights. A mixed-methods study, which blends qualitative and quantitative research, may help to understand better the contours of any transformation in maternal identity. Quantitative indicators, for example, could track overall trends in maternal identity shifts, whereas qualitative interviews or focus groups could provide individual in-depth experiences. To gain a fuller picture of maternal identity that is both generalizable and contextually distinct, the depth of qualitative research would need to be integrated with the statistical power of quantitative research.

Possible Research Questions

Based on the current research findings, future studies could explore the following questions:

- What role does a strong maternal support system play in helping mothers adapt to and thrive within their changing identities?
- How does maternal identity evolve over the lifespan, and what are the long-term psychological effects of this transformation on overall well-being?
- How do societal expectations and cultural differences impact the identity shifts experienced by mothers across diverse populations?

The gaps in research and this study's limitations suggest several avenues for improvement in future research. First, a larger sample size with greater demographic diversity would enhance the generalizability of findings. Second, integrating longitudinal designs could offer insights into how maternal identity transformation persists or adapts over time.

Future researchers could also employ a phenomenological-hermeneutic approach, allowing for a richer exploration of mothers' subjective experiences and meaning-making processes. Thirdly, interdisciplinary studies that incorporate sociological, psychological, and anthropological perspectives could provide a more comprehensive view of the factors influencing maternal identity transformation.

Reflection on Clinical and Research Perspectives

Clinically, this study has served to highlight the need for validating the complexity of maternal identity change and the range of emotions experienced during this transition. Theoretical frameworks that deal with maternal identity development in a matricentric feminist framework can help practitioners cultivate self-compassion, resilience, and empowerment in their clients. Clinicians need to be aware of the ways that cultural and societal influences affect maternal identity and must collaborate with clients to develop personal, authentic, and self-affirming definitions of motherhood.

From a research perspective, the process of exploring maternal identity through a qualitative lens has underscored the value of research that centers on lived experiences. By focusing on mothers' subjective perspectives, this study contributes to a more holistic understanding of motherhood and challenges reductionist views that limit motherhood to its relational roles. For practitioners and researchers alike, this study highlights the importance of recognizing maternal identity as a unique, dynamic phenomenon, deserving of comprehensive exploration and support. As we continue to deepen our understanding of maternal identity, there is a promising opportunity to create more compassionate, inclusive mental health support for mothers, helping them navigate the profound and multi-dimensional experience of becoming and evolving as a mother.

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