UDC 314.335-055.26(497.7)

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# IMPACT OF MOTHERHOOD ON WOMEN'S IDENTITY

**Abstract**

Researches about the social aspects of motherhood and maternal roles are being largely expanded as a study or scientific work in the past decades. The following data are part of the research that was conducted with regard to changes and influence of motherhood on the identity of women. Empirical research was done in the form of semi structured in-depth interviews with 27 mothers of children of different ages, on the territory of the city of Skopje. Motherhood stands out as a life transition period in women's life that entered major changes. These changes mainly relate to a sense of maturation, increased sensitivity, compassion, empathy and tolerance, which can be interpreted as a moral transformation of women caused by motherhood. Findings suggest that motherhood brings sudden change in the identity of the woman affecting multiple levels of her personality and life. Changes in maternal roles, suggest that a mother's role is most intense in the preschool period, when the dependence of children is greatest, but the biggest challenge of motherhood, usually occurs when children are in their adolescent period.

**Keywords:** motherhood, identity, transformation, roles, maturity, emotions.

## INTRODUCTION

In the final decades of last century until today, researches on motherhood and parental roles have become popular and numerous. They are the subject of researches conducted by sociologists, psychologists, psychotherapists, paediatricians and other researchers, mainly in the field of social sciences and humanities. Sociology of family, sociology of gender, sociological theories about motherhood, gender studies, psychoanalytic theory and social psychology are largely dealing with the issues of the impact of social context and social aspects of motherhood as an institution, but also as an experience. This text researches how motherhood impacts the woman's identity, i.e. what kind of changes happen to her after she becomes a mother. The identity is a combination of several segments, such as the characteristics, the beliefs, the personality, the physical characteristics and the association with a certain group. Certain events and experiences affect the shaping of an identity, as well as certain personal characteristics, world view points, etc. A great part of the researches on parenthood mention the so-called period of transition and life change.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The period that is considered transitory or a passage to parenthood is not fixed, but refers to the period when the new member joins the family, till the period when that adaptation ends. It usually lasts up to the first several years of the child's life. Initial researches in this field conceptualise this period as a crisis. The term "parenthood as a crisis" is used to describe the birth of the first child or its arrival in the family. The most accepted and quoted definition is Reuben Hill's one, who says that a crisis is *any sharp or decisive change for which old patterns are inadequate ... a crisis is a situation in which the usual behavior patterns are found to be unrewarding and new ones are called for immediately* (Hill 1949: 51).

In more recent researches, instead of crisis, a more appropriate term used for the period when the first child arrives in the family, is the term *transition. Alice Rossi* in her study "Transition to parenthood" (*Rossi* 1968) reconsiders the term *crisis*, i.e. *normal crisis,* thinking that it is time to change it with transition to parenthood, i.e. parenthood impact: *There is an uncomfortable incongruity in speaking of any crisis as normal* (*Rossi 1968:* 26). Rossi speaks about the preparation for parenthood, i.e. of the lack of possibility to completely prepare for this sudden transition towards parenthood.

Generally speaking, parenthood brings numerous joys and positive aspects, but also difficulties that are experienced as negative aspects. The researches that focus on transition towards parenthood, deal precisely with the sudden changes that occur

and that can be classified into two groups: advantages, i.e. pleasures and positive aspects of parenthood and the difficulties, i.e. the challenges of parenthood. The following are among the positive: feeling of fulfilment, the joy of seeing the child grow and mature, enjoying the child's company, the love towards the child, having a purpose to live for, more contact with family and friends, new dimensions in social integration, more topics to talk about with the partner, the feeling of special connection to the child, experiencing and seeing the world with new eyes, etc. The following are most commonly mentioned as negative aspects: the exhausting requirements of the numerous roles, the financial problems, the baby's great neediness, marital conflicts, i.e. the decreased quality of marital life, as well as decrease of the intimacy and sexual contacts with the partner, isolation from the world and attachment to the home, increase of domestic obligations, not having time for anything, sleep deprivation, dissatisfaction with the physical appearance, losing the work identity, depression, fatigue (Hobbs & Cole 1976; McMahon 1995; Nomaguchi & Milkie 2003; LaRossa 1983, Churchil & Davis 2010). These advantages and difficulties also change the way of life, but also one's personality.

Part of the researches shows that mothers feel more mature after giving birth. The data from the research conducted by the sociologist Martha McMahon on mothers experiencing motherhood shows that there is a difference between the feeling of maturity in middle and working class mothers. Namely, middle class mothers think that they first needed to feel mature before they become mothers, while for working class mothers; it was precisely giving birth to the first child that gave them a sense of maturity. (McMahon 1995: 91). One more advantage of motherhood, according to the results from the mentioned research, is a deep change that leads to moral transformation of the Self. The interviewed mothers declared that in some way they experienced *moral development*, explaining it as feeling less selfish and self-centred, while feeling more responsible and caring towards the child. (McMahon 1995: 154).

## CONDUCTED EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON CHANGES THAT OCCUR WITH MOTHERHOOD

The need to explore the impact of the social context, the social aspects of motherhood appears as a scientific necessity to question re-examine the existing theories, ideologies and myths about motherhood, such as myths about "good mother " and " bad mother ", as well as their impact on the experience of motherhood, self-confidence, performance of the role, changes in mother roles throughout the generations and ages of children and, finally, the well-being of women.

The following data are part of the research that was conducted with regard to changes and influence of motherhood on the identity of women. Empirical research was done in the form of semi-structured in-depth interviews with mothers of children of different ages, on the territory of the city of Skopje. In accordance with the applied qualitative methodological approach, in respect to the demographic characteristics, the sample used for this research was quite homogeneous. These were biological mothers, of Macedonian ethnicity, whose socio-demographic status gravitates around the middle class, married, with high-school or university education, who live in the urban part of Skopje. The sample of interviewed mothers was recruited by snowball sampling and through recommendations. 27 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with mothers were conducted. The mothers were divided into 5 groups according to the children's age. Although the perception is that the term "mother" mainly referred to a woman-mother with a small child or children, the research breaks this stereotype perception, including the mothers of children of all ages, including those that are also grandmothers, and at the same time it gives an opportunity for comparison.

The five groups of mothers were made up in accordance with the following children age groups:

- Mothers of child/children from the age of 0 to 6. This category, as it can be concluded, includes mothers of preschool children.
- The second group of mothers includes the mothers of school children from the age of 7 to 12.
- The third group of mothers were mothers of teenage children, i.e. from the age of 13 to 17.
- The fourth group of mother were mothers of children that are of age, i.e. from the age of 18 to 26.
- The last group of interviewed mothers included the mothers of offspring at an age above 27.

## FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH

Parenthood is considered to be one of the periods of transition in the parents' lives, especially the mothers', because almost in all societies, the main care for the children was the mothers' obligation, or an obligation of the female members. The changes from motherhood are generally interpreted as an increased feeling of responsibility, a sense of maturing, being tolerant, more emotional and strong. When speaking of periods of life transitions, the interviewed mothers mention motherhood as the most significant one.

Topics and questions discussed with mothers that are presented in this paper were to describe this experience when they become mothers and if they felt that this new role have changed them and in what way.

Questions from the interview:
Does becoming a mother changed you, your personality or characteristics in any way? Can you describe those changes? Can you make a comparison of how you were before and after you've become a mother? What aspects of your life or personal characteristics were affected when you become a mother? Have you notice any changes in your self-confidence after you've become a mother?

More than 90% of the interviewed women say that motherhood changed them as person. One third of them mentioned that the change that motherhood made to their character is huge. More than half of the mothers said that motherhood changed them to a certain extent. Only few of them did not notice any changes in their personalities after they became mothers.

Regarding the difference in children's age, it can be noticed that there are differences related to when the woman became a mother, i.e. what her child's or children's age is. It was observed that the intensity of this experience in mothers of small children (0 to 6 years old) is much more expressed, stronger than in mothers with older children. Also, a stronger sensation of personal change after becoming mothers was also observed in mothers with school children. Mothers with teenage or older children noticed that they had experienced changes to a certain extent, but less drastic than those experienced by mothers with smaller children. The reason for the differences in the intensity of the change can be due to two reasons. First, the mothers with smaller children experienced that change more recently and still have fresh memories of their personality before motherhood. While the mothers of older children are more set in their motherly identity and the emotional recalling of the experience before and after they became mothers is to a certain extent a bit weaker.

On the other hand, something that should not be neglected is the influence of the social context, political environment (Greenlee 2014:168) and the changes that occur in the process of building the parental roles through socialisation that has its differences depending on the social values and the norms dominating in certain time periods. Natalia, the eldest of the interviewed mothers, speaks of these influences. She had not noticed special changes in her personality when she became a mother and thinks that that can be attributed to the time in which she become a mother and to the social and political context which influenced the building of the roles especially gender roles in that period.

*We were not brought up the same way you were. Mind you, we were aware and mature. I don't know, I did not change much. As, four children grew up with our mother. Family closeness between the parents, the father and the mother, had nested in us. Of course, my father and my mother were different. He worked, she was a housewife. It was clear what the role of the housewife was, it was clear what the role of the breadwinner was. Now both partners are breadwinner and both roles should be similar. I simply adopted that continuity of the family feel, of bringing up children.* (Natalia, a 73-year-old mother of a daughter 50- and a son 46-years-old)

Borka, who had already as a 16-year-old medical school student single-handedly delivered many women's babies as part of the practical training, also believes that her personality had not changed much after she had become a mother it was normal not to feel huge change at that time. At that time women were more prepared for switching in to motherhood, upbringing has prepared them to accept that change without any sort of stress.

*I do not remember anything of that sort. I don't know... I was prepared for children and for a family. I was prepared, so it did not come as a stress or shock.* (Borka 58 years old, a mother of two sons 33 and 37)

Unlike them, the interviewed mothers with younger children said that they felt more significant changes in their personality.

For Eva this was a major turning-point in life. She felt she was completely changed with respect to how she experienced herself, but also regarding household work, which she thought that previously, was more equally distributed between the spouses.

*This was definitely the biggest turning point in my life and it was sudden. OK, not much time has passed, but I can't really remember the old Eva, how I was, how I experienced myself before motherhood. In the photos I noticed that before, when I was a girl, my face was happier, and after I became a mother, a veil of worry is constantly present. I mean, I lack that happiness that carefreeness brings, the joyfulness of a child (laughter). The feeling of worry is constantly with me, I lost my carefreeness. One more thing that I became aware of is that I did not become a housewife when we started to live together with my husband, but only after I became a mother. We both did not worry about home too much, it seemed as if we were more equal in the responsibilities that we had, but maybe that was because there was no one to make such a mess. After I became a mother, it is no longer that unimportant and if I want the home to be cleaner, tidier and to have lunch on the table for the sake of the children, I take it on as my responsibility...*

*Also, I think that my emotional balance was disturbed after I gave birth to my son, I can now cry at something that is quite banal. It is as if I somehow forgot how to be myself the way I was before motherhood* (Eva, 35 years old, mother of 5- and 2-year-old children)

Similar experience in regard to noticeable change in some personal characteristics was shared by Maja. For her this turning point was most visible with regard to maturity, her independence and awareness that now she could manage to do everything. She explains these newly found characteristics with regard to her relationship with her mother; as if she suddenly freed herself from the protective cuffs that she felt due to her mother's dominance:

*The main change occurred in the sense of: I can do everything myself, I am grown up now. Before I was under great influence of my mother who is a very strong woman and has an opinion about everything and rarely changes it, meaning that she is not very flexible with respect to such things, so I was under her protection. Actually, as I matured and grew up, it started to bother me and I could not deal with it. At the moment when I left home, it was not so intense because without children, without somehow... We did even not communicate that much, but from the moment the children were born, I somehow felt grown up. It is as if I have the strength and courage to say: I am all grown up now and I can do everything by myself.* (Maja, 35 years old, mother of children of 5 and 3)

The preoccupation with the physical appearance is not to be neglected in motherhood. The physical changes were mentioned by several mothers when they were asked about the changes that motherhood brings in terms that their body shape appearance declined. And this change has also affected their self esteem.

Jasmina's first association regarding the changes was precisely the physical appearance; although she goes on to explain the changes in her personality, as well as of the priorities in life.

*First of all, great physical changes (laughter). That is definitely something that is immediately visible. It bothers me a little, there are "parts" that will never be the same. There are other changes as well. You know, after I became a mother, I think I became more intuitive compared to before. I somehow intensely sense things, especially things related to the children. More sensitive in the aspect that something can very easily make me cry, soften me up and hurt me. I see other children as I see my own... Also, before, I was very organized with many activities and everything was very precise and orderly. Now, there is work, the children, activities with them, so I do not have much*

*time. It is probably a question of prioritizing.* (Ana, 39 years old, mother of children of 4, 7 and 11)

Aside for these changes, regarding maturing, abilities, independence, responsibility, the mothers also spoke of emotional changes. Aside for Eva and Jasmina, this change was also mentioned by Milena. She speaks of increased emotionality after becoming mother, as well as empathy towards some unfortunate situations involving children in everyday life or portrayed in films. It is as if she simply feels maternal not only towards her child, but towards children in general.

*Now I can not watch everything, I can't bear to look at violence; I can not stand to hear about abuse, especially not of children. I change the channel immediately. Or murder... I can't stand to watch any of that. My current phase is tender and sweet. Anything evil concerning children... I just can't. I can't... Or photos of starved children, pleas for help. I can't stomach that.* (Milena, 35 years old, mother of a 6-month-old son).

Regarding self-esteem after becoming mothers, it is noticeable that motherhood brings increased self-confidence in women.

"Highly increased self-confidence. Now I am convinced that I am capable, I am ready to raise the baby. I can guarantee the life of both me and baby, alone. So I can totally be independent, in decision-making and in support. Today if I need to ..., to upbring it myself, to pave the way alone, I think I am capable."

(Gordana 42, mother of children from 9.5 and 8 years)

The changes that were described by mothers were generally related to the *maturing* process, expressed by a heightened feeling of responsibility, maturity, ability and goodness in them, and on the other hand, the changes largely affected the *emotional aspect* of the mothers' personality, who, after becoming mothers, felt more emotional, compassionate, empathic and tolerant, compared to the period before becoming mothers. What they lost is mainly a feeling of carefreeness and spontaneity that they used to have. Another thing that is affecting the strength of the feeling of change was the period of time in which some of the interviewed women were becoming mothers. Those who become mothers in the past century had felt more prepared for the new role and this shift was not experienced as significant change in their identity.

## CONCLUSIONS

The personal changes in mothers such as the feeling of maturity, becoming a more responsible person, more capable person, the heightened compassion and empathy, are recognised in other researches as well that treat the changes in the mothers' personality. McMahon refers to these changes as a moral transformation and a moral reform of women, especially evident through the moral aspects of the role itself, of someone that takes care of the children and nurses them. According to her, this is not only a second socialisation or resocialisation of women when they mature by learning new ways of acting and bearing, but a *change in their hearts* (McMahon 1995: 129), a change in how they experience and perceive things.

The above findings speak of the fact that motherhood brings a sudden change in life and at the same time, in the identity of women by changing the components that it is made up of, i.e. influencing more segments in her life. However, it is noticeable that there are differences of the impact of motherhood on women's identities according to the period of time and the context in which these women lived. Mothers who were also grandmothers reported that the impact of this new role was more subtle compared with mothers of children of younger age where this impact was generally described as significant regarding their personality and as sudden change and turning point in life. Earlier, gender roles were clearly divided and there were no major deviations from it. Today, thanks to the changes that have occurred regarding gender equality and women's rights movements, there is a wider range of opportunities and choices to make for women. And what is also noticeable is the increased mode of practicing more child-centered way of upbringing children. According to sociologist Milic, "child-centeredness" as a practice, attitude and behaviour by parents, was based on the new assessment of the child as a value (Milic 2001). The child as a central figure in the family appears only at the beginning of the 20th century and according to recent research it can be concluded that this practice is becoming even stronger in this century and is mixed with multiple roles and areas of interest for women, making this process of gliding into maternal role with a stronger experience of personal change.

The changes in a mother's role that happen in relation to the age of the children, show that the maternal role is most intensive in the preschool period, when the dependency of the children is the greatest, becoming an important and dominant source of the woman's identity, but the greatest challenge of motherhood appears mainly when the children are in their adolescent period.

Certain life events or processes bring changes in people lives. Motherhood is certainly one of the life events that comes sudden and have impact on women's life. The strength of this impact on women's identity depends on the time period and cultural context when they become mothers.

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