

## The Becoming of a Mother: Psychological World of First - Time Mothers

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** The present study delves into the realm of first-time motherhood, the transition to which is complex and multifaceted, involving numerous emotional and psychological adjustments. Examining the mental representations and maternal intuition experiences of first-time mothers can provide valuable insights into their perceptions, experiences, and challenges during this period. **Method:** The study used a purposive sampling method, selecting nine first-time mothers who had given birth in the past year. Data collection involved semi-structured in-depth interviews, analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. **Results:** What emerged from this exploration was that women primarily constructed the following representations about motherhood. Firstly, A Mother's confirmation to the maternal imperative built by the society highlights her passive participation in the marginalization of her personal desires. Secondly, Mothers experience a constant push and pull between the profound desire for connection with their child and the fear of potential loss exposing the emotional self-preservation they engage in. Thirdly, Mothers have different representations of the intuition that they share with their babies. For mothers who's spiritual belief takes the front seat, look at it as a gift from God, for mothers who have a scientific outlook to life look at it and approach it accordingly. Their meaning making of this experience is in line with the meaning they make out of their lives largely. Lastly, Mothers enjoy the exclusivity in the relationship they share with their infants, accounting for their sense of self as a mother and the responsibility to take care of their baby. **Conclusion:** Motherhood therefore is not a singular experience; rather, it is plural by nature. It becomes pertinent to tap into such plural maternities, to gather, explore and understand this individualized psychological space of first-time mothers, highlighting the importance of a personalized approach to maternity.

**Keywords:** *Motherhood, Psychological World of First-Time Mothers*

India's ascent to the position of the world's most populous nation<sup>1</sup> is accompanied by a sustained high birth rate<sup>2</sup>. In that context, the stories and experiences behind these numbers are even more captivating. The journey of bringing a baby to this world is not just a clinical event but a much more personal and pivotal event in a mother's life.<sup>3</sup> Particularly noteworthy are first-time mothers, who embark upon a novel experience characterized by a confluence of unique 'first-times'. By delving into their narratives, we

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can gain invaluable insights into the joys, challenges, and transformations<sup>4 5 6 7 8</sup> that define this journey into motherhood in a nation brimming with life. Keeping in mind the intricate experiences brought along with this journey, this study aimed to tap into the realm of first-time motherhood, by way of understanding it using mental representations and maternal preoccupations that play a paramount role in molding this significant period in a woman's life.<sup>9 10</sup>

Mental representations are constructs of reality formed from memories, conscious and unconscious fantasies, expectations, and perceptions of past experiences. These constructs influence an individual's self-perception and interpersonal interactions.<sup>9 11 12</sup> These constructs aptly describe the psychological states and processes experienced by women as they navigate the transformative journey of motherhood.<sup>11 12</sup> Research has explored the multifaceted nature of maternal representations during pregnancy and early motherhood. Studies by Ammaniti and colleagues, Ilicali and Fisek highlight the dynamic nature of these representations<sup>9 11</sup>. Ammaniti and colleagues identified three distinct themes in pregnant women's narratives: physical and emotional transformation, developing a relationship with the unborn child, and anxieties surrounding the transition to motherhood. Similarly, Ilicali & Fisek found that maternal representations tend to be more positive during pregnancy than after birth, becoming more nuanced as mothers gain experience with their babies. Further research delves into the impact of maternal representations on the mother-infant relationship.<sup>11</sup> Wendland & Miljkovitch (2003) explored the conscious mental representations of high-risk primiparous mothers. Their findings suggest a shift in focus from self to baby during the transition to motherhood, with themes of joy, concern, constraint, and personal growth emerging.<sup>13</sup> Meier & Edginton (2020) examined the prenatal representations of mothers at risk for recurrent care proceedings. Their study revealed complex and often conflicted representations reflecting past traumas and substance misuse issues. However, some mothers also expressed positive and hopeful feelings.<sup>14</sup>

The link between maternal representations, preoccupation, and mental health has also been explored. Biringen & Robinson (1991) found that preoccupation with negative emotions and worry during pregnancy and early motherhood were associated with an increased risk of postpartum depression and anxiety.<sup>15</sup> Conversely, Ammaniti and colleagues (1991) and Madigan and colleagues (2014) suggest that positive fantasies and preoccupations related to attachment and caregiving might act as protective factors against poor mental health outcomes and promote secure mother-child attachment. The impact of maternal representations on child development paints a similarly complex picture.<sup>9 16</sup> Studies by Miljkovitch & Wendland (2004) and Winnicott (1987) suggest that preoccupation with anxieties can hinder cognitive and motor development and mother-infant interaction.<sup>13 17</sup>

While existing research offers valuable insights into maternal representations and intuition, a critical gap emerges in understanding these experiences for first-time mothers in India. The emphasis on unipolar representations, being either positive or negative, may oversimplify the emotional reality. Traditionally, research focuses on the benefits of positive representations and the drawbacks of negative ones. This study addresses this gap by investigating the presence of mixed emotionality. It explores how mothers navigate a confluence of joy and anticipation about parenthood, intertwined with anxieties about childbirth, childcare responsibilities, and societal expectations. By examining this emotional interplay, the study aimed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how first-time Indian mothers perceive and approach motherhood.

## **METHOD**

### ***Study Design***

For this study, a qualitative research design employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen and implemented over a span of one year. IPA offers a nuanced approach, well-suited for delving into the lived experiences of first-time mothers. Its emphasis on detailed exploration enables participants to articulate comprehensive narratives of their experiences making it an ideal method for capturing the depth and complexity of their accounts.<sup>18 19</sup>

### ***Study Sample***

Nine first-time mothers aged 21 to 35 participated in the study. This demographic is often considered typical for first-time motherhood, representing a significant portion of the population experiencing this life experience. Purposive sampling was employed to select first-time mothers who had given birth within the past year, ensuring the captured experiences were recent and minimizing recall bias. Exclusion criteria were applied to control confounding factors such as mental health conditions impacting well-being during pregnancy or postpartum and traumatic events during this period. All participants agreed to participate and cooperated in the interview process.

### ***Data Collection Method***

After obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted using video conferencing platforms such as Google Meet and Zoom to gather primary data. An interview guide, based on the literature review and study objectives was prepared and validated by three experts. For participants with a preference for Tamil, the interview guide was double-translated by a proficient translator to retain its essence. Semi-structured questions were tailored based on participants' perspectives, aiming to elicit a natural flow of experience sharing. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour and were audio-recorded with participants' consent. No repeat interviews were conducted. The researcher possessed attributes such as empathy, active listening skills, and cultural sensitivity to establish rapport and navigate participants' narratives respectfully while remaining self-aware of biases, emotions, and assumptions.

### ***Data Analysis***

Interpretative phenomenological analysis was performed manually. The micro-level interpretation of the participant accounts is therefore made possible by the relatively small sample size of the majority of IPA studies, providing a framework for delving into a person's lived experience. Recorded data were transcribed accurately, cleaned, and treated as independent units of analysis. Interview transcripts were coded through an inductive process involving multiple readings of transcripts. Key sentences were identified, and codes capturing their core themes were assigned. Similar codes were then grouped together, forming the basis for broader categories. Subsequently, these codes and clusters were re-examined. Notes and the transcribed interviews were reviewed to identify and integrate similar elements. Related categories were then arranged together to verify the accuracy of the themes.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The current paper aimed at delving into the realm of first-time motherhood, exploring the maternal preoccupations and mental representations through analysis of the data collected has emerged significant themes which are discussed below.

### ***Desires of the Self Eclipsed by the Demands of Society***

This theme explores the central narrative of societal expectations overriding personal desires and emotions during the journey into motherhood for some first time mothers. The act of becoming a mother can become more about fulfilling external expectations than internal yearnings, leading to a marginalization of the self within societal norms.

*“My only and only focus at one point in time was to come to conceive, somehow to get conceived so I won’t have to face these questions.” - Participant 7*

The social construction about the "biological clock," actively sends messages for women to conceive at a certain age, imposing a maternal imperative.<sup>20 21 22</sup> Participant 7 expresses this pressure. In her early thirties, the desire to conceive was fueled by a need to avoid societal questions and judgment, not primarily a personal yearning for motherhood. Here, the act of procreation is driven by a fear of judgment rather than a genuine personal desire.

“According to my culture and customs, we have to move immediately after child birth, so I did, after moving to my in laws, everything changed ... I had to take over the household chores as well, I can't be with my baby all the time, but I wanted to be with my baby you know, I wanted to be with him during his first moments you know, his first milestones, I wanted to be there with him”.

The participant's experience after childbirth highlights the conflict between personal desires and cultural expectations. Following the tradition of moving in with in-laws, her focus was expected to be shifted to household chores, limiting her time with the newborn. This directly contradicted her desire to be present for her child's "first moments" and milestones. This situation reflects a sense of helplessness in the face of cultural norms. Negotiating these expectations can be challenging because defying them risks being labeled a “not so good - daughter-in-law” who fails to fulfill her familial obligations.<sup>23</sup>

The pressure to conform, as described by Bandura in Social Cognitive Theory<sup>24</sup> stems from years of observing and internalizing societal messages about a ‘mother’ and a ‘daughter-in-law's role. Especially for first time mothers in a collectivist culture as India, a person's sense of self is closely tied to how others see them fulfilling their social roles and responsibilities. While societal judgment discourages negotiation about such discrepancies, it becomes important to acknowledge the internal conflict experienced by these mothers. Liss and colleagues (2012) suggest that a mother's "Actual Self," encompassing her desires and goals, might differ from her "Ought-Self," which reflects societal expectations of motherhood. Societal pressure to be a perfect mother can intensify feelings of guilt and shame when a mother falls short of her own internal expectations.<sup>25</sup> Fulfilling familial obligations and upholding family honor are deeply ingrained values in the Indian parlance.<sup>26</sup> Mothers prioritize these values, even if it means sacrificing personal desires.<sup>27 28</sup> Similarly, studies highlight the fear of social disapproval that can lead mothers to conform to expectations, eventually choosing to suppress her desires to avoid the negative emotions associated with defying expectations.<sup>29</sup> Therefore the mothers engage in a subconscious cost-benefit analysis. The emotional cost of potential disapproval, family conflict, and societal judgment might outweigh the potential benefits of pursuing her desires.

### ***One foot in, One foot out - The beauty and danger of maternal vulnerability***

This theme has its central narrative of the inherent vulnerability in connecting with the baby, the delicate balance of emotional self-preservation and attachment avoidance as a coping

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mechanism. This theme acknowledges the nuanced coping strategy of using work as a deliberate distraction from intense attachment emotions. Mothers navigate the complexities of attachment dynamics, recognizing both the profound vulnerability and the need for emotional self-preservation.

*“I was consciously trying not to feel attached, not to feel anything about this baby. I was continuously working during my pregnancy the entire day I used to work. So, I didn't give myself time to think about baby” - Participant 6*

Mothers, like Participant 6, navigate a constant push and pull between the profound desire for connection with their child and the fear of potential loss. This fear stems from the vulnerability inherent in attachment, as described by Attachment Theory<sup>30</sup> While secure attachment is crucial for healthy development in both mothers and children, the very act of forming a strong bond creates a risk of emotional pain if something unfortunate were to happen.<sup>31 32</sup> Participant 6's constant work and conscious avoidance of emotional connection reflects an attempt to manage the overwhelming emotions associated with potential loss. This behavior aligns with research on maternal anxiety and attachment<sup>32</sup>, which suggests that mothers with higher anxiety are more likely to exhibit attachment avoidance. Similarly, studies highlight how fear about a child's well-being can influence emotional processing and lead to distancing behaviors in the mothers.<sup>34</sup> This fear could contribute to the desire for emotional distance observed in Participant 6. While such avoidance strategies might offer a temporary sense of control. However mothers who utilize avoidance might inadvertently model this behaviour for their children, impacting their emotional development.<sup>35</sup>

### ***Supreme maker's work? Science? Sixth sense? Synthesis of two souls? - Takes on Intuition***

This theme brings out the profound and enigmatic connection that many mothers experience with their babies on account of the heightened sensitivity to the needs of the baby that they experience.<sup>36 37</sup> This maternal intuition is considered by some as a magical sixth sense, while others view it as a remarkable synthesis of emotions and science. To certain mothers, this connection takes on a divine quality. However, despite the various perspectives on maternal intuition, many found it challenging to articulate their feelings about this profound experience, as it defies conventional language and logic. Interestingly, some mothers draw comparisons between their own experiences of maternal intuition and those of their mothers. Participants 2 and 7 drew parallels between their own experiences and those of their mothers.

*“It definitely sounds magical because I don't know... if you can say sixth sense whatever to get activated for a mother when their kids are in danger. ... Like even My mom still knows what I am....She knows what exactly is there wrong for me... So that way every mom knows what her baby is” - Participant 2*

*“my mother knowing everything about me even before I told her asking me if I was not feeling well I myself might not even know if I'm going to fall sick but she used to be like something seems wrong Ramya are you ok and then two three hours I'm down with fever except for that me knowing that my mother is able to find out a lot about me honestly everything else” - Participant 7*

Some, like Participant 9, view it as a "God's gift," reflecting a spiritual dimension.

“I would say it's God's gift “ - Participant 9

Participant 6 exemplifies the conviction and certainty mothers can experience through intuition, defying external pressures.

“But somehow something kept telling me, you know, I need to feed her some milk and not formula. And I shouted at everyone I fought with everyone and actually said i would feed her milk, I was very scared. Because my family continuously told me that the doctors had told me to feed formula this week, but I didn't. I was nursing her. And they were like so definite the bilirubin level would go up. There was a thought you're actually putting the baby at risk and all those things. But when we went there, she didn't have jaundice anymore. That was an intuition.” - Participant 6

In the traditional view of motherhood<sup>39</sup> feeling confident in understanding a baby's needs and wants is seen as crucial for mothers' emotional well-being and for them to feel fulfilled in their role as mothers. Research on maternal intuition paints a picture far more complex than a mere "sixth sense.". Years of experience caring for oneself and observing others lead mothers to unconsciously process subtle infant cues, becoming experts at interpreting cries, expressions, and body language.<sup>47</sup> This expertise allows them to anticipate needs and respond effectively, much like Participant 7 describes. Leyh and colleagues (2016) found that mothers with secure attachment styles were more accurate at interpreting their infants' emotions.<sup>40</sup> This attunement creates a feedback loop, as demonstrated by Feldman et al. (2010), where mothers who were more attuned to their infants' cries had babies who experienced less stress.<sup>41</sup> This aligns with the intergenerational aspect highlighted by Participant 2. Individual differences also matter, as studies found variations in mothers' confidence in their intuition.<sup>37</sup> Maternal intuition is not a mystical power, but rather a complex interplay of experience, emotional connection, cognitive processes, and cultural influences. Understanding its multifaceted nature empowers mothers to trust their inner knowing while remaining open to other sources of information.

### “This is where he gets what he wants”

For some mothers the early stages of motherhood are characterized by an intense and often exclusive bond between mother and infant. This exclusivity stems from the infant's complete dependence on the mother for sustenance, comfort, and care.<sup>42</sup> This experience fosters a profound sense of connection, responsibility, and accomplishment in mothers, as evidenced by the narratives of Participant 7 and Participant 8.

*“But whenever he needs a feed he would come to me so when he used to come crawling towards me.. That was a very nice feeling. Because this is where he gets what he wants, I’m like okay, you're going to come to me, come to where I am. That was a nice feeling. That created a lot of bond” - Participant 7*

Participant 7 describes the unique communication channel formed through breastfeeding, with the baby's nonverbal cues becoming a language understood only by the mother.

*“I think when they're depending on you for everything, they're relying on you, they're looking for you, you automatically develop that love with them that Okay, this one is dependent on me. So, it is my duty that I take complete care of him, and I stretched myself to do the best for the child. So, I think it automatically just flows. It's an instinct that comes to every mother” - Participant 8*

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Participant 8 captures the sense of responsibility that arises from the infant's complete dependence. This feeling ignites a primal urge to nurture and protect, a biological and emotional awakening driven by hormonal changes and maternal instincts. Successfully navigating these demands fosters a sense of self-efficacy, known as "maternal competence"<sup>43</sup>. Mastering new skills like calming a fussy infant or breastfeeding provides a powerful sense of accomplishment and reinforces the mother's unique role in the child's life. It's a constant feedback loop – the baby's dependence<sup>44</sup> elicits a nurturing response, leading to a stronger bond and a greater sense of maternal competence. Notably, the maternal competence loop, whereby an infant's dependency elicits a nurturing response from the mother, fostering stronger bonds can be modulated by a mother's psychological well-being. The emotional exchanges between mother and infant, referred to as their "first language" by<sup>44</sup>, significantly enhance developmental milestones. This preverbal mode of communication is not merely a form of contact but a quality interaction that informs the infant's sense of identity, instills trust, and fosters autonomy. Therefore, it becomes pertinent to ensure<sup>45</sup> support for the mother's emotional health to enrich maternal-infant bonding. The exclusivity of the mother-infant bond can, however, evoke a possessive dimension of motherhood. This dimension is linked to the infant's absolute reliance on the mother for its needs, fostering a sense of singular ownership, where a mother may perceive the infant as needing her and only her. While this could be seen as an adaptive aspect that ensures diligent caregiving, it also necessitates examination of boundaries and the inclusion of other caregivers for a balanced development of the child. Healthy parent-child relationships extend beyond the mother to include siblings and other caregivers, illustrating the importance of broad caregiving environments for holistic child development.<sup>46</sup>

### *Limitations and Future Directions*

This study has shed light on the complexities surrounding maternal preoccupations and mental representations in the context of first-time motherhood. However, it is crucial to acknowledge certain limitations. The relatively small sample size may affect the applicability of our findings to a broader population. Additionally, the qualitative nature of our data, derived from in-depth interviews, introduces a degree of subjectivity that warrants consideration despite the efforts to conduct a rigorous interpretative phenomenological analysis. The temporal focus on the immediate postpartum year may limit the generalizability of our results over a more extended period. The inclusion and exclusion criteria, particularly related to mental health history and traumatic events, may inadvertently exclude relevant perspectives. Future research endeavors are encouraged to adopt longitudinal methodologies, conduct comparative analyses with multiparous cohorts, and explore interventions targeting maternal preoccupations that may result in care-taking anxiety. Further, incorporating partner perspectives and examining diverse cultural contexts would enhance the scope and practical relevance of subsequent studies.

## **CONCLUSION**

To conclude this study looked into how first-time mothers navigate through their preoccupations and mental representations during the first postpartum year. The study uncovers meaningful insights into the psychological landscape of first-time motherhood, highlighting dilemmatic concerns that encapsulate the character of this journey. Looking ahead, it's crucial for future research to expand methodologies and explore suggested areas for further investigation. During the interview, the mothers were able to talk openly about their experiences and provided information that could not have been obtained using quantitative methods. Furthermore, this methodology clarified the characteristics of their experiences, consequences, and reflections. It can be said that there is no such phenomenon

as maternity in an all-encompassing singular sense but, just plural maternities, as each woman's journey of the process towards becoming a mother is shaped by her own individual history along with environmental and cultural involvement.<sup>3 8</sup>

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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