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The Prediction of the Dimensions of Maternal Identity Development
during Pregnancy on Women's Sense of Growth following Childbirth
during the Transition to Motherhood.

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Abstract

The transition to motherhood is described as a personal developmental journey that begins with creating expectations in the early stages of pregnancy and ends about a year after childbirth (Luyben, Kinn & Fleng, 2011). In this journey, a significant change occurs in these women's lives and identities. These identity changes are responsible for the emotional complexity that women feel following childbirth and their transformation into motherhood (Stern, 1998). Rubin (1961, 1967, 1984) refers to the development of maternal identity as part of the development of female identity. Mercer (2004) views childbirth and the transition to motherhood as a significant stage in a woman's life, but these alone are not enough to achieve maternal identity. According to her, maternal identity is achieved later through the experience of motherhood roles or identification as a mother.

The transition to motherhood is a developmental task (Rogan et al., 1997), described as an experience with an opportunity for personal growth (Parens, 1975). According to the findings of Pancer and colleagues (2000), an increase in the complexity of thinking before and after the transition to parenthood indicates the opportunity for growth during this period for both men and women. In this study, which deals with the transition to motherhood, we examined the identity factors that can contribute to successful transitions and personal growth after childbirth.

Along with the obvious benefits of the transition to motherhood, this event may incur certain costs. While the transition is considered a central life event that evokes joy and a feeling of fulfillment and challenge, it can also be experienced as a stressful experience, creating anxieties and feelings of incompetence and interpersonal

loneliness, as well as a sense of loss in terms of autonomy, time, appearance, and occupational identity (Nicolson, 1999).

Therefore, it is important to examine the processes of maternal identity development and the sense of growth before and after the birth of the first child. Thus, the current study examined the predictability of the five dimensions of maternal identity development (Luyckx et al., 2008) during pregnancy on the sense of growth of postnatal women.

This is a short-term study that examined the transition to motherhood on three occasions. Measures were taken during three time points: about three months prior to childbirth, about one month post-childbirth, and about three months post-childbirth. The study sample included ninety-seven women in the first wave, sixty-four women in the second wave, and fifty-eight women in the third wave. The participants completed questionnaires regarding their maternal identity, personal growth, as well as demographic questionnaire, and an open-ended question in which the women were asked to describe their main thoughts at that time. The three questionnaires and the open-ended question were presented in all three waves of research.

At the initial stage of examining the hypotheses, several preliminary descriptive statistics were performed. Next, to examine whether the dimensions of maternal identity development during pregnancy predicted postnatal personal growth, a nonlinear growth model using the Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) method was generated (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Finally, in order to identify other aspects that could not be expressed in the closed questions, the answers to the open-ended question were analyzed and divided into categories.

The findings of the study indicate that in-depth exploration of maternal identity during pregnancy predicts postnatal personal growth. Moreover, the dimension of "identification with commitment" during pregnancy predicted a higher sense of growth after birth, i.e., the more women gathered information and investigated their maternal identity and felt that they identified with it, the more they reported a higher sense of growth after childbirth. The other dimensions of maternal identity development (exploration in breadth, commitment, and ruminating) did not predict postnatal personal growth among first-time mothers.

The variables "Age" and "medical problems during pregnancy" were included in the model during baseline in order to control interpersonal differences. A negative significant correlation was found between age and post-natal growth, for each of the dimensions of identity development, i.e., the older the age, the less maternal identity was developed. An identical association was found between the variable "medical problems during pregnancy" and the indices of the of maternal identity development, i.e., women with medical problems during pregnancy reported lower levels of identity investigation indices.

The qualitative analysis emphasized the changes and stages that women undergo during the transition to motherhood. At the initial stage, the participants were still not mothers, and accordingly, most of their thoughts concerned the upcoming future. Later, when they became mothers, they were concerned with the practical matters of their new situation; and finally, at the end of the maternity leave and the return to work, the participants were concerned with their new life routines, which were expressed in a broad perspective.

The described research has broadened our understanding of the importance of in-depth exploration of maternal identity and identification as early as the pregnancy period and its effect on the sense of personal growth after giving birth. This research has many theoretical implications on maternal identity development during pregnancy and on women's sense of growth post-birth, leading to effects on family life, love life, and career. Furthermore, the research results reveal the importance for educators and therapists to encourage pregnant women to explore their maternal identity, ask profound questions, and contemplate their identification as mothers.