

**Motherhood Experience and
its Relationship to Postpartum Adjustment**

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Summary

The early weeks of caring for a new baby are often a rewarding and enjoyable time. This is not, however, the case for all women. Some experience difficulty in making the adjustment to their new role. While stressful life events are one of the known risk factors for poorer postpartum adjustment, motherhood experience is generally not classified as a stressful life event. This is despite the fact that postpartum depression and anxiety are related to a number of individual infant-related stressors, including breastfeeding difficulties, infant colic and infant temperament.

This work examined the relationship between the ease or difficulty in managing the early weeks with a new baby and how well mothers adjust psychologically. In two quantitative studies, new mothers were assessed using a purpose-built self-report measure of motherhood experience, with postpartum adjustment assessed on indices of depression, anxiety and well-being. These studies were followed by a small qualitative study.

Study 1 investigated motherhood experience, and how it compared with antenatal expectations, as stressors for first-time mothers ($N = 136$). The effect of experience and the expectations-experience discrepancy on adjustment was tested, with strong relationships evident. To determine if parity was a factor in the relationship between experience and adjustment, Study 2 assessed first-time *and* multiparous mothers ($N = 66$) postnatally. Similar relationships were found between experience and adjustment to those in Study 1, regardless of parity. Study 2 also investigated whether multiparity might operate to benefit mothers through skills developed in relation to baby care. While this hypothesis was not supported, previous experience of caring for a baby was clearly beneficial, because multiparous mothers found motherhood experience with their current baby easier to manage than first-time mothers. Via semi-

structured interviews, Study 3 sought to gain greater understanding of the specific experience of primiparous and multiparous mothers ($N = 17$) in the early weeks postpartum, how this impacted them psychologically, and what did assist them or might help others. Challenges described by primiparous mothers were more specific to the infant compared with multiparous mothers, who noted the challenge of managing the demands of multiple children. Learning that both the enjoyable and the challenging aspects of motherhood were not permanent and passed with time was frequently reported. Mothers groups, both online and in person, were commonly noted as valuable.

Overall, the results of these studies suggest that mothers who struggle to manage the demands and changes that accompany the early weeks with a new baby may be at risk of emotional difficulties. The causal relationship between experience and adjustment could not, however, be definitively resolved in this research. Cause and effect could be addressed in further research testing the effect of an intervention targeting experience on adjustment. Should experience be confirmed as a causal factor in adjustment, it may provide opportunity for modification, unlike fixed or historical risk factors for postpartum difficulties. Irrespective of causality, in clinical settings, the assessment of motherhood experience may be a useful strategy in addressing postnatal depression and anxiety, including at sub-clinical levels.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

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