

## NEGOTIATING MOTHERHOOD: THE DIFFICULTIES AND CHALLENGES OF RURAL FIRST-TIME MOTHERS IN PARUNG, WEST JAVA

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### Abstrak

Suatu studi hermeneutic fenomenologi telah dilakukan untuk mengeksplorasi berbagai kesulitan dan tantangan pertama kali menjadi seorang ibu di daerah pedesaan Indonesia. Sebanyak 13 ibu muda yang berpartisipasi dalam studi ini telah menceritakan pengalaman mereka tentang kesulitan dan tantangan yang mereka alami ketika dirinya telah menjadi seorang ibu pada periode tersebut. Data dikumpulkan dengan wawancara semi struktur. Tiga kesulitan dan tantangan utama menjadi seorang ibu teridentifikasi dari studi ini : (1) menjadi ibu baru tidak mudah, (2) menjadi seorang ibu baru tidak sebebaskan seperti sebelum menjadi ibu (3) mencoba menjadi seorang ibu yang baik. Dengan hasil studi ini diharapkan para praktisi kesehatan akan lebih memahami masalah kesulitan dan tantangan-tantangan yang dialami seorang ibu muda pada awal masa menjadi ibu, sehingga keadaan tersebut dapat diatasi dengan baik.

### Abstract

A hermeneutic phenomenological study was carried out to explore the difficulties and challenges of being a first-time mother in a rural area in Indonesia. The purposes of the present study were to provide health care providers with a greater understanding of the difficulties and the challenges of early motherhood. The thirteen Indonesian women who participated in this study described their experiences of first-time motherhood during early motherhood. Data were collected through semi structured conversational interviews. Three majors difficulties and challenges were identified: (1) being a new mother is not easy (2) a new mother is not as free as she was before and (3) trying to be a good mother. These challenges have offered insight, information and understanding into the experiences of Indonesian women with early motherhood. Also, this study will give a richer and deeper understanding of the needs of women during this period and about their feelings on the mothering role, which is useful for health care providers and others, who are concerned about this issue.

*Keywords: Experiences of motherhood, challenges, postpartum period*

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### Introduction

The birth of a baby is accompanied by major physical, emotional and social changes in the life of a woman. These changes are complex and profound<sup>1,6</sup>. Mothering can be one of the most difficult and/or most satisfying roles in a woman's life. Part of the difficulty in adapting to mothering comes from the many additional roles that must be managed alongside this new role<sup>9</sup>. Taking on the mothering role for first-time mothers admits a woman to a new social status. However appraisal from the people in her social world helps her to shape the final outcome<sup>11</sup>. Following the birth of an infant, there is an enormous shift in orientation to the child and frequently away from the woman as a "woman", and towards being a "mother" of her child. This requires a transition in self-concept to incorporate the concept of

being a mother who is responsible for a helpless infant<sup>12</sup>.

The women can experience severe stress in their transition to motherhood. Some of these stresses will arise from the woman's own psychological needs, while others will be caused by external factors such as financial difficulties, other family demands or marital tension.

The majority of women become confident and competent as mothers. However, even within this group, when they honestly and openly discussed about being a mother, women viewed the inability to go out when desired and their increased responsibilities for their infants as challenges in their lives. Additionally, the many changes in their routines necessitated by a new

infant make the shift from before pregnancy to their current situation a major challenge<sup>7</sup>. These dramatic changes may be uniquely stressful events in the normal life experience of becoming a mother<sup>1</sup>.

While much has been written about the experiences of North American and European women, there is little research-based information about the experiences of being a mother in Indonesia. The need for information about the experiences of motherhood among Indonesian women is important because motherhood is highly valued in Indonesia.

In this study, the researcher will use Indonesian women's own descriptions that express their difficulties and the challenges in the first four to six months of first-time motherhood. These descriptions will enable the health care services in Indonesia to increase their knowledge and sensitivity so that they can better understand how new mothers feel about the mothering role and what happens to women during this critical time. It will provide an insight into the type of care that might be appropriate to help women in their adaptation to motherhood.

The purpose of the study is to describe the difficulties and the challenges of motherhood during this period through an in-depth phenomenological study.

## Methods

The methodology employed in the study is phenomenology, a qualitative approach appropriate to exploring meaning. In particular, hermeneutic phenomenology as outlined by van Manen<sup>17</sup> was used to describe and interpret the difficulties and challenges of first-time mothers among women in rural Indonesia. Through the research, the researcher attempt to uncover the meaning of the "lived experience" of these women, that is, their every day experiences dealing with the difficulties and the challenges of being a mother during their first four to six months postpartum.

## Recruitment of Participants

The participants in this study were women who had been selected from among eligible mothers in Iwul Village in Parung District, West Java, Indonesia.

## Data Collection

The data were collected using semi structured conversational interviews. A total of two interviews were conducted with each participant in the study. The first interview was designed to give the mother the opportunity to describe her experiences without interruption. The second interview was arranged after an

identification of initial themes had been accomplished based on what the women said in the first interview.

## Data Analysis

All data in this study were transformed into textual descriptions or transcripts of the participants' experiences in becoming new mothers in the Indonesian language.

The thematic analysis of each interview in this study was conducted through the selective or highlighting approach as outlined by van Manen<sup>17</sup>. Using this approach the researcher read the transcribed texts and asked, "What statement(s) or phrase(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the experience being described by these participants in this study. The themes selected seemed to best describe the experiences of first-time mothers in a rural area in Indonesia.

## Results and Discussion

### The Participants

A number of 13 women took part in the study. All participants were married and first-time mothers. They all had been mothers for at least four and no longer than six months at the time of the interviews. The participants' ages ranged from 17 to 26 years. There was a variation in the educational background of the participants. Five of the women were graduated from an elementary school, five from a junior high school, one from a senior high school, one from college with a diploma and the remaining participant had a bachelor's degree from a university.

### Being a New Mother is Not Easy

What is it like to be a new mother? One of the women summed up very briefly what all the participants expressed in one way or another when she answered, "*Being a mother is not easy*". The participants had to assume the responsibility for their babies and the care of these babies. They felt this responsibility was difficult and they tried to become more efficient in meeting the baby's needs and establishing a daily routine of care. They had to incorporate such activities as breast feeding, bathing, changing diapers, dressing, consoling, comforting, putting to sleep, watching over, playing with and keeping the baby safe and well into their daily lives.

The women were interrupted in their sleep, had a shortage of sleep, because of the infant's demand. Fatigue was a common complaint by the women in this study.

*When the night comes, he falls asleep, yet at midnight, he wakes-up because he wets his bed. Because of that,*

*I'm often upset and tired because he interrupts my night's sleep. So, I suckle him, then he sleeps again.*

Lack of sleep and fatigue are well documented in the research on early motherhood<sup>13,16,11</sup>, taking care of the children, especially during infancy, is a tiring and demanding job, which can seem unending.

In fact, responsibility for the care of the baby contributed most to the difficulties and challenges of being a new mother for all women in this study. Morse suggested that the first-time mothers might be at risk of increasing levels of distress, anxiety, frustration and a vicious cycle of dysfunction and depression throughout the early motherhood period. These experiences are a very common occurrence for first-time mothers.

In addition, since, to a great extent the tasks of mothering are culturally and socially prescribed, women may experience difficulties internalizing some of these expectations, depending on their degree of readiness. It is not uncommon that women experience conflict between how they expect motherhood to be and their own experiences as mothers<sup>18</sup>.

Another difficulty associated with motherhood that emerged from this study was the role conflict between the role of mother (caring for the baby) and her role as wife (caring for the husband and the household). These tasks can be overwhelming for every mother no matter how experienced in childcare or housekeeping and how balanced she is<sup>5</sup>.

Traditional societies put a heavy emphasis on these dual roles so it is not surprising that many women in this study were expected to fulfill traditional roles as a mother and housewife. They did most of the housework and took emotional responsibility for their family. The merging of responsibilities for their husband, household and children may give rise to difficulties when child care obligations conflict with the obligations of housework and care of a husband.

These women were also trying to learn about their babies and the babies' behavior. Because they lacked experience in caring for a baby, some of this learning was by trial and error. Recent findings by Sethi<sup>15</sup> on the dialectic in becoming a mother were similar with the findings this study. In the Sethi 's study found that the women preferred to learn about caring for their babies based on their common sense through trial and error.

Learning by this method was difficult for the participants as they attempted to sort out the many different wants and needs of their young child. Many found it difficult to know what was wrong with the baby when the baby cried. They experienced a great deal of frustration when they were unable to soothe or comfort

a crying infant. The pain and frustration can be felt in this woman's voice:

*I get fed up with my son every time when he keeps crying. I'm often confused, 'what's wrong with this kid? I have rocked him in my arms, I've given him milk, I've taken him outside, but still I've no idea, why he's crying'. I'm often impatient because I don't understand anything. It is very difficult to understand his attitude and his wants.*

Mothering could be even more challenging in case the baby had a problem. The mothers talked about their responsibility to keep their babies healthy. If the baby becomes sick the women's worries increased, as well as the physical demands of care. They wake up more frequently at night, watched the baby more and had to spend more time in holding and trying to comfort the baby.

*My challenge . . . I don't want my son to fall sick. I want him always to be healthy. Previously, he was sick and I was confused, scared, stressed and felt sorry for him. That's why I always look after him carefully. I don't want him to get sick anymore.*

In addition, having a baby added to the monthly expenses of all the participants, especially in providing infant needs such as for feeding, dressing, and keeping the infant healthy. This resulted in a reduction of family finances for a number of the women, especially those who were of low socioeconomic status. They faced financial difficulty because of the infant care responsibilities.

### A New Mother is not as Free as She was Before

The women now had to consider their infants and what to do with them if they wanted to do anything or go anywhere. A common response was, "life has changed" and freedom was restricted or the many demands left little time for what she liked to do. More frequently the women simply stated, "you are not as free as you were before".

There was a big difference from being a young single woman in the village or being married and being a mother. It was felt as a big transition in their lives. As a mother, the woman faced the reality of her current situation i.e. the care of her baby. All the women compared their life circumstances before they had a baby with the situation after the baby was born. Because of the demands of motherhood they did not have the same amount of time to spend for themselves nor with friends. Before having a baby they had more time for dressing themselves, grooming their hair and just looking their best, whereas after the baby was born taking good care of themselves, was a real luxury. One of the participants explained:

*Sometimes I don't even have enough time for myself for just taking a bath or for combing my hair and making-up my face. Now I don't have time to look after myself. So, what people around here say is true "once you have a baby, you look old" because there is no more time to take care of yourself. I just have a child and I already look faded, look old, tired.*

The women explained that they were putting the baby's needs ahead of all others and even before their own needs. The baby's needs were rated as having a much higher priority than their own pleasure or their personal needs, no matter how hard this was at times for them to do. For some women putting the baby's needs first was a big change from their previous lifestyles, because they were all fairly young and did not have a great deal of responsibilities. However, they were willing to change for the sake of the baby:

*Now, I'm not able to please myself. Now I am actively breast-feeding, I have to choose healthy eating habits, I mean I must be careful to select foods to keep me healthy since I think of my baby and I must be prepared to sacrifice my own pleasure. It is the time to think of my child.*

A parallel finding in this study by Sethi<sup>15</sup> identified the theme of "giving the self", in which the women described the giving of themselves to their babies in the form of putting the baby's needs ahead of all others, especially their own. Consequences of giving attention to the baby meant that the women often had less time for themselves, therefore had to pay less attention to their own personal needs and wants.

The mothers also talked about their restrictions on going outside the home when they wanted to as a form of thinking first about the baby's needs. They had to consider the baby's well being first before they could go out to do shopping or just going out for enjoyment. They often cancel their plans to go outside the home because they were worried about the baby. At the very least they had to plan carefully for the baby's care if they needed to go out for a short period.

*After being a mother, now if I want to go out alone, I have to think about my son first. If I go somewhere, with whom will my baby be? Should I bring him along or not? Does he need milk? So, I must be at home to take care of my child. It is all right to stay at home.*

Another loss of freedom that some women talked about had to do with working outside the home. Prior to marriage and the birth of the baby the women had a job. Almost all of the women in the study quit working after they had a baby, some of them immediately after marriage. They felt that they did not have time for working outside the home anymore because of infant

care responsibilities. Some of them preferred staying at home with the baby to working outside for the sake of giving the best care to their baby. One woman stated:

*Before having the baby, I used to have a job at the factory just for fun and getting money. But now, I can't do that anymore. I have to stay at home with my baby.*

Motherhood as a restriction on a women's freedom and social activities has been described by Boulton<sup>4</sup> and Oakley<sup>9</sup> in their studies on mothers. More recent findings on the effects of motherhood on limiting women's freedom were similar with the findings of previous researchers and the findings in this study. For example, Barclay, Everitt, Rogan, Schmied, and Wyllie<sup>3</sup> found that the women were of the opinion that their whole life had changed when they became mothers. These women highlighted the loss of time for themselves, partner and friends after they became mothers. Brown, Lumley, Small, and Astbury<sup>5</sup> described the feelings of confinement felt by the women following the birth of infants as that "tied down feeling".

### Trying to be a Good Mother

According to the participants in this study, being a good mother was an important aspect of mothering and something which they tried very hard to accomplish. More than one woman discussed what makes a "good mother" and stated, "I really want to be a good mother."

The idea of a good mother goes far beyond how the woman interacts with her infant. The women in this study used terms like "patient" and "loving". They described behaviors such as being attentive to their babies and meeting their babies' needs as activities that a good mother would do.

The mothers are expected to place low priority on their own personal, sexual, educational and economic needs and are supposed to take care of the needs of their family first. These women constantly received messages from their own mothers or the older people around them that mothers should be beautiful, calm and happy, as well as good shoppers, cooks and clean and tidy housekeepers.

Richardson<sup>11</sup> noted that this extended view of a good mother is prevalent in society and demonstrated how it works against women in that "definitions of good motherhood, which emphasize maternal self-sacrifice and the child-centered nature of society, which frequently puts children's needs and rights before women's, which means that women can expect to receive little public support if they blame their dissatisfactions with motherhood on their children" (p.4).

All the women talked about increasing patience with their child and being able to maintain patience even when mothering was most difficult i.e. in case a baby could not easily be consoled.

*What kind of a mother am I? Well, I am a mother who has insufficient experience. I wish I could be a good mother, in fact as a mother I should be more patient. But I think I am not like that yet. Having a child is training for me to be a patient person . . . a mother should be patient with her baby.*

The word "trying to be a good mother", illustrated the major challenge for all these women as mothers. They recognized the importance to be more and more patient when trying to understand what the baby wants, especially when the baby kept crying. It was really a big challenge for these first-time mothers who did not have any previous experience with a crying baby.

According to the mothers' viewpoint, in order to be a good mother they should intuitively respond to the baby's needs, so that the baby is happy, comfortable, and does not cry. They also felt that good mothers are the ones who stayed at home to look after the baby. The "good mother" is a well-defined theme in the literature on mothering. The Pacific Postpartum Support Society<sup>10</sup> identified good mothers as ones who always have the time to play with their children and the wisdom to guide and discipline them.

It was not always easy for these mothers to be patient with their infants because of the many demands of motherhood. Some felt that they had not encountered any other event in their lives that demanded the same amount of patience while others felt it was particularly difficult because by nature and habit they were not particularly patient. They had to work at being the mother they thought they needed to become:

*Sometimes when he is being quite calm, I feel sorry and regret that I often get angry with him. Why do I get angry with him? He is only a little baby. He doesn't know anything yet.*

The participants in this study described that trying to be a good mother meant having the primary responsibility of childcare. They also talked about how a good mother would love and watch over the baby and would turn her attention to the baby. For the sake of the baby this meant that they would quit their job and stay at home to take care of the baby.

Quitting work would allow them to be a better mother. Some even felt that they would only go back to work when their baby has grown-up. They felt they had a good chance to get a job because they are still young. One woman stated:

*Sometimes I'm thinking of going back to work. Of course, you know what I mean, right? I am a mother now I have to quit working for my son. But . . . well that's okay. I still have a lot of chances for that. I am still young, aren't I?*

In addition, they felt a good mother should be able to manage her time wisely. For a number of the participants in this study, this included time for taking care of the child, time for doing the housework and time for the husband. They talked about how they divided their time for those different responsibilities. They wanted everything related to housework to be done before caring for their husband and their baby.

*I always try my best to have everything well done. I should be able to manage my time well...I wake up very early in the morning, while they are still sleeping, and quickly do my work [smiling].*

## Conclusions

The early motherhood experiences of the thirteen first-time mothers in this study contribute to an understanding of what the difficulties and the challenges are like to be a new mother in a rural area in Indonesia. They shared their experiences through personal narratives and contributed to the researcher's experience in phenomenological research.

Through exploring the depth and complexity of the phenomenon of first-time motherhood and implications for maternal health during this period, the study helped to identify the difficulties and the challenges of first-time mothers and provided insight into the mothering experience of women who live in Iwul Village.

There were a number of difficulties and challenges associated with motherhood. First-time mothers experienced a great deal of change in their lives after having an infant. They found that infant care and the responsibility that went with this care were very demanding. The difficulties and the challenges were related to infant care combined with other responsibilities and trying to be a good mother to their infants.

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