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The experiences and identities of working mothers: an explorative psychoanalytic feminist study

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ABSTRACT

The worldwide increase in working motherhood has seen a substantial number of South African women joining the workforce. While a number of South African studies have explored various aspects of motherhood, fewer bodies of work have focused on working motherhood specifically. This qualitative study explored the experiences of working mothers in South Africa from their own perspectives, as well as how mothering and career identities are negotiated in light of dominant mothering and gender ideologies. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six working mothers and Interpretive Thematic Analysis was used to analyse the data. Findings indicated that working mothers experience difficult transitions to motherhood as well as a variety of demands and pressures related to their dual role. Working motherhood was found to be characterised by a shattering of expectations, subsumed needs, a loss of self, changes in the family dynamic or marital dyad, as well as strains on mental health. Upon returning to work, participants additionally experienced much ambivalence and tension in negotiating conflicting identities. During this time, they have to compromise in a number of ways, by letting go of pre-motherhood functioning and learning to accept support. Their journey therefore includes substantial losses that necessitate a process of mourning. This results in working mothers' engaging in a number of defences to avoid feelings of loss, sadness, resentment and anger related to their dual roles. Moreover, dominant mothering and gender ideologies were evident in the results, albeit to varying extents between individuals. Lastly, participants derive meaning from their working motherhood identity through being impactful in the world and by being able to provide for their families. They also experience meaning in their mothering role in highly individual ways. Implications for clinical practice are provided.

Keywords

Working mothers, working motherhood, experiences of working mothers, working motherhood identity, motherhood, motherhood and loss, maternal ambivalence, transition to motherhood, mothering ideologies, gender roles