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Shaping identity : personal narratives of women's birth experiences.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the childbirth narratives of first-time mothers in order to understand and describe the ways in which experiencing birth for the first time shaped their personal identities and identities as women.

The study was guided by a qualitative postmodern research approach and involved conducting in-depth interviews with eight South African first-time mothers. The narrative accounts of these mothers were then analysed in two stages in order to present the findings. Firstly, using a holistic-content narrative analysis approach, significant themes that emerged from the data analysis were contextualised and organised in relation to the holistic accounts and interpretations of participants' experiences in order to present how their personal identities were shaped through the experience of giving birth for the first time. Secondly, by conducting a qualitative thematic content analysis, shared common themes emerging from participant's narratives were presented to understand in what ways individual elements interrelated to all participants' identities in general, with a focus on female-gender identity.

The findings reinforce the message that women's personal and shared social identities are indeed significantly shaped by their first time childbirth experiences. These findings lend voice to women's experiences and may serve to deepen insight for individuals and professionals working with perinatal women.

Key words: psychology, women, mothers, childbirth, narratives, stories, narrative research, qualitative research, interpretavist philosophy, postmodernism