

Different Than Expected: Motherhood After Infertility

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Purpose

To examine the influences and effects of expectations and infertility on the experience of motherhood

Background

- There are few empirical studies and/or books examining the transition from infertility to motherhood or the psychological impact infertility has on the experience of motherhood. The paucity of literature on these subjects is important to examine because millions of people become parents after experiencing infertility each year.
- Literature on parenthood expectations and outcomes presents mixed results for whether higher or lower expectations lead to better outcomes but demonstrates expectations influence outcomes (Flykt et al., 2011). Influences on parenthood expectations include:
 - Literature
 - Previous experiences
 - Family and social groups
 - Medical community
- More research is needed on the parenthood expectations and outcomes specific to those who become parents after experiencing infertility.

Method

Participants

- 25 women (N=25)
- Aged 31-47 (M=38.92, SD=4.34)
- Average age of first child after infertility: 4 years
- Self-reported their race/ethnicity as White (92%), Black (8%)
- Recruited from listservs, social media posts, and flyers posted in public spaces.
- Awarded \$25 Amazon gift card

Measures and Procedure

- Semi-structured interviews (averaged 1 hour)
- Participants were asked ~10 questions, including “How did motherhood differ than expectations?”
- Interviews were transcribed verbatim.
- The responses to “How did motherhood differ than expectations” and other places where expectations were discussed were isolated for thematic analysis.

Data Analysis

- Thematic analysis is a method of analyzing patterns in qualitative data and data coding to develop themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021).
- Coding process: **independently developed codes** → **met to discuss findings and resolve discrepancies** → **finalized coding scheme**:



- The six codes were used to develop initial themes.
- After discussing these themes and reconciling differences, four themes emerged from the data.

Results

Theme 1: Harder Than Expected

- Most participants discussed general parenting as being harder than they expected
- Many women who breastfed discussed how getting established with breastfeeding was harder than they anticipated
- Some women described the negative impact on their relationship with their partner
- Many women expressed challenges with finding a work-home balance

“Parenting is so hard. And you think you have it figured out, and you get it all worked out, and then they changed. And I didn't have any clue... that it was going to be like that.”

Theme 2: Impact of Expectation Source

- Close relationships with others: Friends or family provided more realistic expectations
- Research: Books are often a source but contribute to unrealistic expectations
- Self: Many participants described how they did not feel they met the expectations they set for themselves before motherhood

“I never saw myself as being this type A personality... I always saw myself as this free spirit, but I'm not at all. I need order and control and organization.”

Theme 3: Lack of Control During Birth and Motherhood Transition

- Many women who described mental and physical challenges in the birth and early postpartum periods expressed difficulty bonding with child
- Parents of children who spent time in the NICU wished hospital staff would have helped them more in the transition
- Many participants learned how much factors outside their control can influence their child's disposition

“I wish the lactation consultants would have been a little more forthcoming on what it's like to deal with a NICU situation, which they didn't address at all.”

Theme 4: Unique to Infertility

- Feelings of guilt when having negative experiences or emotions
- Higher expectations and pressure due to infertility struggle, which was often associated with feelings of guilt and shame
- Surprised by the difference in treatment from medical professionals in early motherhood compared to infertility care

“I wanted him so badly and I tried for so long... I was feeling like I was not grateful for what I had been given.”

Discussion

Summary

- The 25 women interviewed about their transition to motherhood after experiencing infertility shared how their experience was harder than expected, influenced by where they sourced their expectations, the impacts of birth and early motherhood on that time period, and some ways they felt infertility impacted the transition.
- ~40% of participants described things that were easier/better than they expected but they were shared alongside discussions of what was harder.
- Previous literature has demonstrated perceived lack of control among individuals with infertility, which influences negative mental health outcomes. Our findings suggest that lack of control continues to influence women's experience with the transition to motherhood.
- Our findings have implications for resources, education, and systemic changes needed to provide parents with more realistic expectations and support, which can then have a positive impact on well-being.

Limitations

- Some limitations this study has are the small sample size, the data was collected at only one time point, and more sociodemographic diversity is needed.

Future directions

- Future research should examine the factors that differentiate experiences that were harder compared to easier than expected.
- Most participants in the current study became parents through ART. More research is needed to compare those experiences to people with infertility who become parents through adoption, surrogacy, fostering, or spontaneously.

References

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