Mothering Identity Experiences: A Backwards Glance

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Abstract

Aspects of human growth and development have been studied since the inception of psychology as a field of science. The impact of the quality of mothering on children has been highly researched. However, little attention has been paid in the professional literature to the experiences of mothers as their children move through developmental stages. The focus of this hermeneutic phenomenology study was to investigate how mothers' experiences of their child's growth and development changed her perceptions of her identity and herself. Participants were eight women who had launched the oldest child from the home within the last 2 years. Extensive data analysis and triangulation procedures were conducted to develop themes. Universal themes experienced by all participants were categorized as internal (questioning, comparison, being purposeful, and feeling supported) and external (experiencing joy). Some participant experiences were influenced by incidental themes such as subsequent children, expectations versus reality, and spirituality. Participants' experience of their mothering role was also impacted by the process of letting go through the developmental progression of their children. Clinical implications are discussed.

For many women, the role of "mother" is one of the most important they will experience over the course of their lives. Lifespan development theories and models increasingly show that development is a life-long process and that people continue to experience changes in how we view ourselves within developmental contexts (Baltes et al., 2006; Hoyer & Roodin, 2009; Korsmo et al., 2009). Little is known and studied about how mothers experience their ever-evolving children over time or reflections on their mothering identity throughout their children's lives. In this phenomenological study, the researchers, all mothers themselves, sought to understand the influence of children's movement through developmental stages on a mother's experiences and understanding of her own identity as a mother.

Review of the Literature

Ruddick (1994) wrote, "mothers are identified not by what they feel but by what they do" (p. 34). A review of the literature certainly supported this statement. A keyword search with the terms *mother identity, mothering*, and *mothers*, included a multitude of studies on the activity-oriented and behavioral experiences of mothers, including parenting skills, transitioning to motherhood, balancing motherhood with a career, life stressors, and other relationships (Benzies et al., 2006; Brunton & Russell, 2008; Choi et al., 2005; Hollway, 2010; Miller, 2011; Rangel et al., 2018; Zhao, 2018). Ringrow (2020) analyzed mothering blogs

and identified three themes: (a) mothers believed motherhood to be a journey toward emotional or spiritual fulfillment, (b) motherhood is a job in which they serve as the boss and the children serve as the employees, and (c) there are seasons of motherhood in which the work is harder and seasons in which the work is not as difficult. The mothers who contributed to blogs and this study also appeared to see themselves in terms of what they did as a mother.

One noteworthy study, Laney et al. (2014) explored the identity development of mothers in terms of how the individual changed as a result of mothering, but not how the child's lifespan influenced this change. Laney et al. (2014) noted, "Motherhood allowed the women to develop greater capacities within themselves and these capacities were extended to others in relationships and through the women's careers" (p. 1245). Laney et al. (2014) further identified that mothering provided personal expansion (i.e., greater capacity for others, a stronger sense of fulfillment, and more emotional connectedness, include personal expansion), relational expansion (i.e., relationship skills gained

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through motherhood became transferrable to other relationships), generational expansion (i.e., understanding that in mothering, they were investing in the future), and vocational expansion (i.e., while restricting time mothers could invest in career, they were able to apply experiences of self as a mother to self as a worker). This study did not focus on the shifting of identity for mothers as their children developed. In a review of scholarship on motherhood, Arendall (2004) summarized that mothering is viewed as the vehicle through which women formed an identity, inferring that the identity of "mother" is a singular and static event to be achieved. In that case, it may then seem logical to focus on *what* comprises mothering. However, if mothers are indeed the driving force for their children to understand themselves, it is reasonable that a mother's understanding of herself and her identity would change throughout her child's developmental process.

A concept present in the literature on mothering was the weight of the pressure to be the ideal mother. In her seminal work, Hays (1996) identified ideal mothers to be the all-caring, self-sacrificing primary caregivers of children, providing consistent nurturing, and lavishing "copious amounts of time and energy on their children," which kept mothers within the privacy of the family home and outside of the public and paid professional work (Hallstein, 2006, p. 97). Hays (1996) labeled the structural components of the prevailing sentiment around the ideal mother and a woman's adherence to this institutionalized belief as "intensive mothering." Prikhidko and Swank (2018) noted that these societal pressures of motherhood, as well as the internalized expectations for a mother to achieve the lofty ideal mother, versus the realities of motherhood, may have implications for healthy emotional and mental functioning. Additional research (Forbes et al., 2020; Lamar & Forbes, 2020; Rizzo et al., 2013; Rizzo & Watsford, 2020) supported increased stress, depression, and decreased life satisfaction for mothers whose identity centered around these traditional mothering ideals. However, the focus of studies such as these seemed to be also on the activities associated with mothering rather than perceptions and experiences of mothering and identity.

Mowder (2005) conceptualized parent development theory to encompass a variety of elements to becoming and being parents. One such element in this theory suggested that the child's developmental process affected the parents' perceptions of their role. However, Mowder (2005) did not specify how parents' understanding of self-as-a-parent shifted based on the change, growth, and development of their children. As Gilligan (1982) purported, women, understand themselves in the context of their relationships. Thus, as the relationships with their children change, a mother's understanding of self would also change.

Mothering literature is replete with the activities and work that the role of mother entails. Some studies discussed the impact of mothers on children, the activities that comprised mothering, mother's thoughts about that work, how motherhood impacted individual identity and expanded individual capacities. Others focused on the systemic pressures for mothers to be ideal mothers, parent development theory, and the relational nature of women. There is a dearth of research focused on the intrapersonal dynamics and emotions of mothers as their children transition into more independence. Thus, the authors were curious about mothers' experiences of the continual shift in their child's developmental level and how she perceived that to influence herself, identity, and her mothering role.

Methods

This study involved the use of a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to understanding the lived experience of a mother's identity as they moved through the various stages of their child's development. Phenomenology for educators' research contains three major elements: gathering of life experiences, analysis of themes, and stages where the research results provide a practical application (Magrini, 2012). To achieve this, the researchers followed the six action steps of van Manen's (1997) phenomenological inquiry to conduct the study which included: turning to the nature of lived experience; investigating experience as we live it; reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon; describing the phenomenon in the art of writing and rewriting; maintaining a strong and orientated relation to the phenomenon; and balancing the research context by considering the parts and the whole. Van Manen's (1997) approach focuses on developing an understanding of both how the experience was lived by the participant as well as its influence on them making it uniquely suited to this study of mother identity development.

Role of the Researchers

The role of the researcher is especially central to qualitative inquiry. Researchers enter into their work with both positive and negative bias from their own experiences and the review of literature that prepared them for the study (Hays & Singh, 2011). As such, it is essential to note that the researchers in this study were all mothers, but not all have launched their first child out of high school. Regardless, this group of mothers had their own conceptualizations of what other mothers may have to say on the subject and had to be intentional about establishing trustworthiness. Being aware of biases was part of the process. Journaling was incorporated into each step of the process, and researchers worked in teams on the coding and data analysis to make sure the study lived up to the rigor of qualitative work.

Establishing Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is one of the most essential elements of any qualitative study. In this case, with researchers who identified as mothers interviewing participants who were mothers, the need for trustworthiness was paramount. The researchers employed techniques of credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility

was established using peer checks and member checks. This process required prolonged engagement with the data which Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify as another means to enhance credibility. Transferability is based on the involvement of a participant pool from a purposive sample of mothers who have recently launched a child. Finally, an audit trail was kept by the researchers, and reviewed by peers, to achieve dependability and conformability.

Data Collection

The current research used semistructured individual interviews as a method of data collection. The interview protocol was developed by the research team using consultation with the literature and reflexive discourse to address bias. The researchers allowed for thick descriptions by encouraging participants to provide detailed accounts of their experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Participants

Researchers utilized purposeful sampling to identify and recruit participants for this study. The population of interest for this study was mothers who were currently in the process of launching or had launched their oldest or only child from the home within the last year. Researchers identified eight participants from various parts of the United States and Canada. The majority of the participants were Caucasian (European American) with one African American participant. All the mothers' ages fell within the early 30s to late 40s, had a higher socioeconomic status, and were highly educated working professionals. Many of the participants were married, religious (specifically Christian), had multiple children, and worked outside the home. Few (one or two) of the participants identified as divorced, not being religious, having only one child, and being a stay-at-home mother. Most mothers were the biological mother of their children with one mother with both biological and adopted children.

Data Analysis

Before beginning data analysis, the authors met to identify their assumptions and biases related to the study. One of the assumptions discussed was that mothering identity was not static, but rather was fluid and looked different depending upon the developmental levels of one's children. During a prolonged engagement with the data, the researchers were attuned to listening for biases in one another's interpretations to triangulate and minimize the effect of their biases and assumptions on the data analysis process. Aligned with van Manen (1997) the authors developed an initial structure for data analysis which freed and encouraged the authors to search for meanings within the participant data. The structure of the data analysis process incorporated van Manen's (1997) holistic, selective, and line-by-line approach. All interviews were transcribed, and the lead author assigned transcripts to the other authors to

engage in the coding process. The entire group met to discuss the coding and analysis protocol. The first transcript was coded as a team to develop a consistent process. The researchers were then divided into teams of two or three researchers.

Coding was conducted within those groups with one person responsible for entering codes into the codebook while the other was journaling the process. All authors had access to all coding through the shared master codebook and each author reviewed the others' codes. After all transcripts were coded, a spreadsheet of all codes was compiled with a column for each researcher to read through to agree that the quotes and codes aligned. The thematic data analysis process was enhanced through the triangulation of an external researcher (last author) experienced in this methodology who had not engaged in the data collection process. Then codes were grouped into thematic categories and discrepant ideas were processed with the entire group, which resulted in the identification of universal and incidental themes. Definitions for themes were developed resulting in the further collapse of themes. The data collection, coding, and analysis process spanned a year and a half, with the researchers engaging with the data aligned with hermeneutic phenomenology until thematic consensus was achieved.

Trustworthiness in the data analysis process was enhanced by externally processing the methods and interpretations with the entire group and through member checking. The final universal and incidental themes were sent to all of the participants. Participants were asked to respond to the themes that resonated and fit their experiences or to identify if a theme did not fit or if there was anything missing from the themes and descriptions. No participants expressed that the universal themes were incomplete in any way or did not fit with their mothering experiences.

Results

Seven universal themes were identified along with three incidental themes for the experience of mothers as their children aged and developed. The researchers noted that these themes seemed to result from both internal and external processes (see Figure 1). Internal experiences for mothers included *comparison*, *being purposeful*, *feeling supported,* and *questioning.* For the mothers who had more than one child, the addition of *subsequent children* also influenced this development. *Experiencing joy* from mothering was an external process. Additionally, for some mothers, *expectations compared to reality* also influenced this process. *Spirituality*, while not a universal theme, shaped both external and internal aspects of participant experiences. Interestingly, there was an internal developmental experience of *incrementally letting go* as children aged that influenced the *evolution* of how the mother understood her role.

Universal Themes

Comparison. Mothers used their own experience as a child to guide their decision making as a mother. Sometimes that was
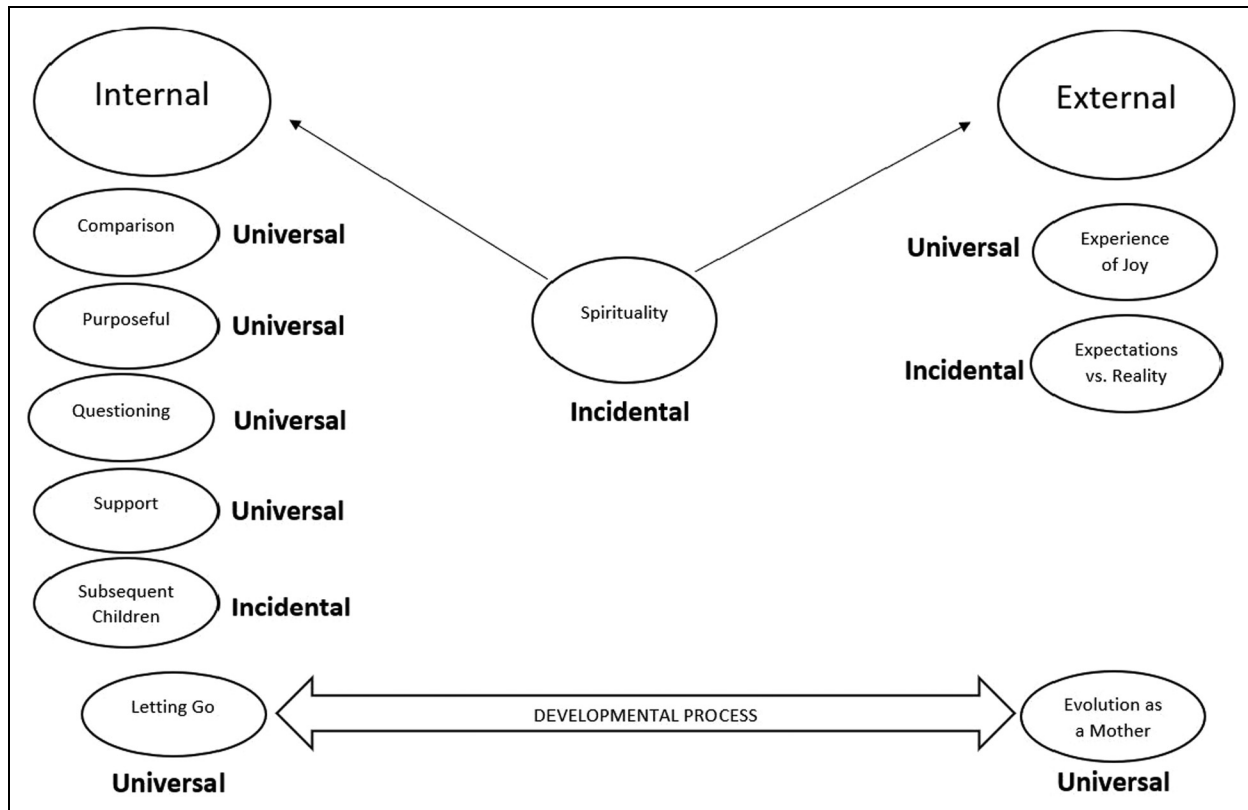
Figure 1. Internal and external influences on the development process of mothering.

to emulate a positive experience and sometimes that was to do the opposite of a negative experience. Getting it "right" could be an added stressor in parental decision making. This internally experienced theme was identified by each participant in this study. The comparisons that participants made included comparing themselves to other "mother" models such as their own mothers, aunts, and sisters. It also included comparing oneself to an internalized ideal of what it means to be a "good" mother. Some participants experienced these comparisons as positively enhancing their own role as a mother, reflected in statements like:

> My mom is so incredibly amazing, in so many different ways that for me I just sort of had that self-confidence of I'm going to try to be like my mom and a little bit better. Like in my mind I thought each generation can be just a little bit better. Like I feel like I probably provide a better foundation for (Oldest Daughter) than my mom did me and then therefore just kind of keep going better.

Some participants, however, considered comparison with other models from the standpoint of needing to do something very different as a mother than was done for them:

> Well my beliefs about parenting were founded on my perception of my mother. And, I think, kind of true to form, how I ended up taking on parenting. I also wanted to do the exact opposite of my mother and not take a passive role.

The internalized comparison with a perfect ideal of what a mother should be was represented by the following example:

> I know I put a lot of pressure on myself for a long time that, you know, I had to do everything perfect the whole family had to just looking perfect and that's what motherhood was like having everything looked perfect.

Mothers acknowledged that they could not help but compare themselves and their effectiveness as mothers to their own experiences growing up, to other mothers they know, and to their own internal ideal of what the role of a mother is supposed to be.

Experience of Joy. Participants consistently talked about the joy that came from being a mother. Joy was felt as mothers relived various experiences through the lens of their children and celebrates successes with them. Mothers expressed having felt joy when children reached developmental milestones and when they influenced mothers' development as much as mothers have impacted their children's development. Joy was felt in the recognition of the honor and privilege it was to be a mother. The mothers in this study shared this experience of joy as something they got from outside of themselves; that it was reinforced by being a spectator and participant in their children's experiences and development. While not directly asked about feeling "joy" about being a mother, participants consistently used words like

"honor," "privilege," "awe," "fun," and "adventure" to describe their experiences as a mother. For example:

> I have just loved being his mother. I mean, and I don't know if that's normal to say that I just really, really like my kids. Like I love them, but I also just really like them. Um, I don't know if that's normal or abnormal, but that's my reality, that's my experience and just, I cherish them. And so I think, you know, if I had it to do over and that there would be obviously some things I would change, but for the most part I would just say, yes, let's do that again. It was just so fun.

The sense of joy and wonder at experiencing their children as they moved through their developmental stages was expressed by each mother as she reflected back on where her child has been, where they are now, and where they will be in the future. A sense of being along for the ride and really enjoying the journey was a palpable feeling for the participants.

Evolution as a Mother. Just as children grow, change, and evolve, so does the role and identity of being a mother. Participants shared that mothering involved being adaptable to who children were and who they are becoming. The process involves the mother's own learning and evolution; learning from their mistakes and making adjustments; and adapting their mothering to fit the person the child was becoming. For example,

> It has changed a lot over the years. I started off as a brand new mom the 1st time being ultra conservative and overly aware and involved my daughter would say. And that has evolved into a much more relaxed, kind of go with the flow parenting attitude that I currently have with my soon to be 14 year old son.

Letting Go. The theme of Letting Go was present with the discussion from each mother interviewed. In this theme, it was noted that as their child grew, these moms had to let go a little at a time. The mom must also let go of self to mother. Letting Go could be saying good-bye, giving up control, uncertainty, and angst. One mother noted "it's never going to be just all of us again you know, in the same way you know. And so that part I really struggle with." But letting go was not always a process of grief, it could also be a process of excitement of their child's development. As an example, one mother stated "I guess I had this feeling too, like they're like your baby birds in your nest and it's like fly baby bird fly. I mean, yeah. Like I love just watching you do, this is what, this is what I raised you for fly baby." One mother's words summarize this internal struggle with both the process of grief and excitement that was found in letting go. She stated,

> You're not losing them, but it's the start of them pulling away from you and needing you as much. But needing you in a different way. So probably I feel like right now I'm in a little bit of a harder, more emotional stage right now, you know, with them getting ready to.. to, you know, move out, you know, and move on to college because I've been so needed for so many years for so many different things. Although I believe I'm going to enjoy it- I believe I'm going to enjoy the relationship we'll have as adults together.

Purposeful. The process of helping to develop a child was a very purposeful one and looks different for each mother based on their values and beliefs. Many of the actions by a mother were done with a specific intention in mind, whether that be for mental, emotional, physical, social, or spiritual development. This notion was illustrated with statements such as "It's my job to nurture that and sort of help him find it for himself. Not necessarily in the sense of like telling him what to do, but it's kind of as a guide, like I, I can remember consciously pointing things out… because I wanted him to, in that moment, understand that that's important….and kind of helping him connect the dots…." Mothers also felt a responsibility in offering intentional guidance and "life lessons" to help their children understand and respond to the world and others. One participant stated, "I think my overall approach has always been that I have to guide her through this maze of life. Try to show her the good things and the not so good things. And how to make sure you connect to the things that are good" and another participant stated "whenever I did have her with me, we tried to again just be really communicative and talk about you know how this is just kind of how things are right now and we have to make the best. You know life, it's always better if you look at it with a positive perspective … I tried to have a lot of conversations about that but that was definitely difficult for all of us."

Questioning. The theme of questioning was present for each mother. Mothers were self-critical. They expressed constantly questioning if the choices they made were the best ones. There was a lot of "I wonder if I had only" inner dialogue that could, at times, be challenging to the mom's sense of self-worth. One mother's statement seemed to summarize this experience of uncertainty: "I always questioned, Did I do the right thing? Did I say the right thing? Did I give him too much freedom? Did I give him too much of the reins? Did I hold back too much?" Another mother of eight children noted that she felt like she was "a failure in some way. Because sometimes I can just get so overwhelmed that I don't feel like I always have the energy, you know, to ask the right questions…."

The regrets were not necessarily about major mistakes made, but rather wishing they had been more observant or spent more time in a relationship with their children. For example, one mother stated, "Instead of being that do-er, I wish I would have been more *Just live for the moment*" and another mother indicated that the busyness of mothering got in the way,

> I just sometimes think back and I think I don't really remember what happened there because I was so worried about so many other things. And I wish I had written more stuff down, documented stuff because my memory, as more and more kids have come along, it is kind of blurry. So, I just wish I would've… just taken more time in the now and documented and enjoyed enjoying every stage a little more.

Support. Being a mother, while a powerful experience, could be stressful, exhausting, heartbreaking, and time consuming. Many

of the mothers recognized times when the help and support of others were pivotal in their development as a mother. The support of others mentioned by our mothers included partners, other mothers, family, friends, and/or God as vital and sustaining for mothers. The following two quotes help illustrate the recognition by our mothers of the significant need for support during motherhood development and the act of mothering. One mother stated:

> I was very intentional about having friends and mentors around me. I even have older women who have kids who have already gone through the stages my kids have. And I find that invaluable, that as I'm struggling with some piece of, more so motherhood probably than parenting, because I feel like a lot of times we talk about women kind of issues with stuff. Um, and it can be something simple like, you know, praying for my kids about something and struggling with a decision on something or, or whatever. But, um, having people around me that I find extremely supportive, I think that helps with the development as well.

Another mother commented:

> Over time you learn to lean into the Lord more. You learn if you can't do it by yourself, you learn that you need help. I think that's a hard thing for most mothers to admit is that we need help you know. And I have always … I have always asked for help because, you know, I realized real early on I need my mother and need my friends.

Incidental Themes

Expectations Versus Reality. Many mothers carried a preconceived notion of what mothering would be like based on both their experience of the mothering of others and what society told them mothering would be like. A period of shock and adjustment was common as the reality of parenting became clearer. This reality aligned with concepts of tasks and affection; yet was different from the preconceived idea of mothering. Comments such as "there were times I don't think I could have known before kids and then after kids how much either joy some situations of bring, but also how much pain some things would bring" and "maybe the most impactful thing that I just didn't know would be … how responsible I was for that child, you know, and how … everything I chose to do would determine or have such a great impact on how they turned out to some degree or choices that they would make, you know" were made by some of our mothers. However, not all our mothers felt the discrepancy between what was expected and what was experienced. As one mother stated, "for whatever reason, I didn't under or overshoot it. Like, it really was just like, it was just as messy and wonderful as I was expecting it to be…. I was just along for the adventure, you know, it wasn't really necessary, I didn't have this image in my mind that it had to attain in order before I could be happy in it."

Subsequent Children. Some of our mothers had more than one child. It seemed that just when mothers started to have it

figured out, a new little person entered the family and changed the whole dynamic. The arrival of another child caused mothers to adjust their parenting to make room for that new child. Mothers shared that these changes included adjustments to physical space, schedules, and resources. Mothers with more than one child presented evidence that they were aware of the distinct differences between their children and the ways in which they made room in their heart or sense of mother identity for all of their children. They shared comments such as,

> Recognizing how quickly that time did go helped me and that definitely had an impact on me. I try it with my youngest when they ask "hey, do you have time for a picnic?" you know with my middle 2 I probably would've been like "no I don't have time to have to clean I have to do this." But I just really see "yes I have time for a picnic now, I can clean later." You know, I think I have I found a better balance with being a mom and being there for them as time has gone by."

Spirituality. Some, but not all, of our mothers addressed how their spirituality affected their mother's identity development. They believed that becoming a mother is a divine calling for them. For some of our mothers, when there was concern and self-doubt, they reminded themselves that God was helping in raising their children. One mother stated, "I think I'm my own worst critic and I think set that bar really high for myself…but the Lord's had to teach me how to settle in to realize 'you know what I called you to this and it's up to me to equip you for it.'" By thinking that God was walking alongside them, they felt comfort. Another mother helped illustrate how mothers were affected and comforted by their spirituality with this statement,

> As a mother we can sometimes feel like we are in charge of it all and it's our responsibility to make all these things happen for them, when really at the end of the day, ultimately it's God's responsibility and he's just entrusted them to us for a time to provide them every opportunity that we can for them to grow, you know, whole body, mind, soul and spirit.

Discussion and Implications

The results of this study revealed that a mother understanding herself as a mother is not a label that comes with the child. Rather, the experiences of "mother" and what that word means appeared to change from birth to adulthood and developed along with the developing child. This finding contrasts with Ruddick (1994) who posited that mothers identify with what they do to care for their children. This finding also is in contrast to Arendall (2004) who presented mothering as a vector for women to achieve the goal of identity as a mother.

The mothers in this study indicated that they experienced continuous shifting in understanding and engaging in their mothering role. This perpetual change in the mothering role the participants experienced may be due to the influence of

their child's ongoing growth and development explained in Mowder's (2005) parental development theory. This finding may also align with the mother's expanding individual identity development of personal, relational, generational, and vocational domains found by Laney et al. (2014). As uncomfortable as constant change may feel, the results of this study identified that the mothers in this study moved beyond their thoughts and feelings to become intentional in how they parented and made a commitment to finding joy in each of the million moments with their children.

The themes in this study highlighted the relational aspects of women as the participants recognized the influence of support systems to encourage and reinforce their understanding of their evolving identities and roles as mothers. Supporting Gilligan (1982) and the value women place on relationships, the mothers in this study struggled and celebrated the letting go process as their children launched into adulthood. If the purpose of mothering is to care for children, then when those children become adults, theoretically the job is complete. It is not surprising that participants were challenged with the feelings about their child reaching adulthood, particularly when it would mean that a part of their self-identity, the mother part, was no longer needed as it once was. However, if the societal and developmental identity of a mother were expanded to include adult children, then the transition to adulthood would not be perceived as an ending of the mother role, identity, and mothering relationship per se, but rather another transitional and developmental stage of mothering, such as a mentor.

In the ongoing changes of an ever-becoming mother identity found in this study, there were internal and external influences that shaped their mother identity and themselves. Hays (1996) also discussed internal and external influences, thus providing support for the experiences of the mothers in this study. Participants reported experiences of second guessing themselves, questioning themselves, and comparing themselves to others. As warned by Prikhidko and Swank (2018) and Rizzo and Watsford (2020) navigating systemic influences and the perceptions of the ideal mother versus realities of mothering can contribute to mental health issues.

The further understanding of the developmental process of mothering identity has implications for mental health professionals. As these themes can evoke feelings of guilt, self-doubt, grief, insecurity, angst, grief, and other challenging emotions, mothers may seek professional help to navigate those concerns. Mothers may not realize that some of the identified challenges are inherent to motherhood and misunderstand their source (Forbes et al., 2020; Lamar & Forbes, 2020; Rizzo et al., 2013; Rizzo & Watsford, 2020). If mental health professionals are aware of this research, they can incorporate assessment regarding the experience of each role clients who are also mothers play in their daily life. This exploration can provide a cathartic experience and symptom relief for the client. Prikhidko and Swank (2018) suggested that clinicians could use rational emotive behavior therapy to challenge irrational thoughts (i.e., shoulds and musts) as they relate to the mothering

role. Further, the researchers suggested acceptance and commitment therapy to navigate through the challenging aspects of mothering to embracing flexibility in the mothering role. Mental health professionals can also provide psychoeducation related to this and other motherhood research that serves to normalize the experience for mothers.

The results also revealed some themes which were incidental, specific to some but not all of the mothers. Not all participants, just as not all mothers, had more than one child. In this study, it was noted, unsurprisingly, that mothers who have subsequent children will have further changes in understanding their role as they learn to mother for more than one child at different developmental stages. Another incidental theme is that of spirituality. Not all mothers in this study, and not all mothers in general, have a connection to a faith system. For those mothers who did, their spirituality served as both a support system and a deepening of faith in their role as mothers. This external and internal influence of faith aligns with research on motherhood blogs from evangelical women which equate motherhood as a journey to spiritual fulfillment and a calling on their lives (Ringrow, 2020). A third incidental theme was the difference between expectations and reality. For some mothers, similar to findings from Prikhidko and Swank (2018), there is a struggle between what they thought about motherhood and what they experienced. Rizzo and Watsford (2020) found that for new mothers, when reality did not match expectations there was an increase in depression, anxiety, and stress. In this study, the participants who noted this theme concluded that the reality was more meaningful than what they had expected. For clinicians working with mothers, having insight into their internal processes and struggles as well as those factors that externally motivate their sense of their role can impact the types of interventions used and lead to more positive counseling outcomes. By engaging these mothers in a "backward glance" of their experiences across their children's developmental stages, we gain insight into how mothers reorganize themselves and their roles to adapt to their children's changing needs. Mothers are adept and using their internal processing as well as their external environment to foster an evolving identity as a mother. At the same time, mothers can be negatively impacted by these internal processes and external factors as they move through the different stages of their children's development. With these insights, clinicians can explore with mothers those factors that continue to influence their ongoing evolution as a mother.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study has some notable limitations. First, due to the sampling process of this research study, there is a lack of diversity in the participants. The majority of the participants in this study were Caucasian women who were highly educated and from a higher socioeconomic status. The results may be different if the participants were more diverse. Second, the small sample size of this study may have implications on the researchers' perceived point of saturation and results of this study. Finally, although extra steps were taken to ensure trustworthiness, the

researchers' familiarity with the participants may have a potential impact on the data analysis process.

Due to the paucity of information on motherhood development from the mother's perspective, additional research on this topic would help expand the limited understanding of this process. A longitudinal study focused on the developmental process of motherhood as it occurs would help provide more precise information than participants recalling their experiences and might assist in the creation of a motherhood developmental model. Replicating the current study with a more diverse group of participants may also help note any cultural nuances to motherhood development that may not yet be documented or may suggest that motherhood development is similar across cultures. Both qualitative and quantitative methods would be beneficial in the further exploration of motherhood development and the expansion of what we currently understand about the mother's development during child rearing and launching of children.

Conclusion

This study sought to identify the developing and evolving identity of mothers as their children move through their own developmental stages. Through engaging mothers who had launched their oldest or only child into adulthood, the researchers were able to tap into mothers' perceptions of their role and this role has been shaped by their experiences. All eight mothers in the study identified experiencing all seven universal themes of *comparison, experiencing joy, evolution as a mother, letting go, being purposeful, questioning,* and *needing support*. Three incidental themes were experienced by some mothers but not all; *expectations versus reality, the impact of subsequent children,* and *spirituality.* As shown in Figure 1, some of these themes were experienced as internal processes, and others were external experiences. In all cases, the themes were felt over the course of their children's development, culminating in where they see themselves now, as their oldest or only children are launching into the world.

This study pointed to the identity development of mothers and associated potential mental health implications with the internal and external influences on how the mother understands her ever-changing role as a mother. Further, this study expanded the understanding of the experience of mothers to include how their changing child changed the mother's understanding of self. Various elements were explored from external variables (such as the child's personality, number of children, and support from extended family and partners) to internal variables (mother's religious beliefs, self-doubt, and intentionality in parenting style).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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