

## Artistic narratives of self-concept during pregnancy<sup>☆</sup>

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### Abstract

This article explores how a woman's self-concept, as expressed in art, changes during her journey toward motherhood in her first pregnancy. The event of pregnancy was examined through verbally framed artistic narratives of a woman's experience of self during her pregnancy with her first child. The three women interviewed all had their first child within the 2 years before the qualitative interview. As part of the interview process, participants created artistic self-symbols to explore changes in self-concept. The narratives created in this study show a definite change in self-symbols as the pregnancy progressed. Symbols move from abstract to concrete, representations of the baby all become larger or more prominent, and colors move from cooler to warmer. There are specific indications of the child within from the beginning of the pregnancy. Jungian theory of archetypal symbols was utilized in the analysis of artistic data. The art suggests that the mother-identity is formed at the earliest stage of pregnancy, and grows in the woman's concept of self throughout the entire pregnancy. This researcher utilized artistic analysis to come to a deeper understanding of the symbolic meaning of a woman's transition to motherhood during a first pregnancy.

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### Introduction

My interest in this subject began with my own transformation during pregnancy. I was beginning my journey towards a new career as an art therapist at the same time that I was also becoming a mother. Colleagues in my classes commented numerous times that my pregnancy affected the art I produced for class. Organic, round, soft shapes dominated my artwork. The feeling of growth as well as protection showed up often. I became intrigued with the way that pregnancy had changed both my artistic expressions of self and my ideas about motherhood. I wondered what this experience might be like for other women and began to think about the stories they might tell about their pregnancy through art. This led to a search for what might already have been documented about this phenomenon. A review of the current literature revealed a significant lack in art therapy research on pregnancy as it relates to transition to motherhood. I anticipate that many women have transformative experiences during pregnancy that are largely ignored by psychology, art therapy, and society in general. By sharing images of the transformation to motherhood we can honor this unique and beautiful journey.

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*Literature review*

In this literature review, various relationships between art, pregnancy, and motherhood are investigated. A woman's experience of pregnancy has significant physical and psychological aspects.

Hrdy (1999) explores the biological aspects of motherhood through her study of primates. Her findings indicate that pregnancy and labor create changes in the brain by causing the formation of new neural pathways, which increase the woman's sensory capacities of hearing and smell. It is interesting to note that although Hrdy studied the transformations during pregnancy on a physical level, she first shares about it from her personal experience of being transformed by the birth of her first baby.

The psychological transformation to mother begins in pregnancy (Bergum, 1989; Ethier, 1996; Fares, 1996; Nelson, 2002; Smith, 1999). Bergum's phenomenological study of six pregnant women investigates their transformation to mother during pregnancy by looking at the issue of shifting body boundaries, which may cause the woman to wonder about her identity. "Throughout pregnancy she experiences herself as source and participant in a creative process" (Bergum, 1989, p. 61). Nelson's meta-analysis suggests that qualitative studies of the "core components" of a woman's transition will help to illuminate the meaning of this experience for the woman. The two essential processes for maternal transition were identified as engagement with the process of becoming a mother and growth/transformation. Specifically, growth and transformation included alterations in self, redefining self, and expansion of self.

Smith (1999) looks at a woman's transition to motherhood during pregnancy in his phenomenological analysis. Smith's study indicates that early in the pregnancy can be a time of adjustment and uncertainty. Middle pregnancy can be a time of introspection where the mother experiences a change in self-perception and prepares for mothering. Late pregnancy is characterized by a turn toward thinking outward and about the birth of the baby. Results of Smith's study suggest that pregnancy "can act as psychological preparation for mothering" (p. 10).

In Ethier's (1996) longitudinal study of pregnant women, the development of "mother identity" during pregnancy is investigated. The results indicate that women begin to define self as "mother" during pregnancy (Ethier, 1996). In another study, Ussher finds that "A woman begins to assume the identity of mother in the eyes of society almost as soon as she is visibly pregnant, ceasing to be a single unit long before the birth of her child" (1989, p. 81). Ussher advocates that researchers start to look at the changes a woman goes through during pregnancy and not just after she gives birth.

In her research, Fares (1996) finds that women have mental models of themselves as mothers and of their children during pregnancy. These models act as guides for future responses to their children. Both the affective and cognitive content of a woman's representations of self and baby will predict perceptions of the baby (Fares, 1996). According to Price (1988), a woman's internal images about being a mother are based in fantasy when she is pregnant and the reality that comes when she gives birth can be both surprising and disappointing. She asserts that pregnancy is a time when women can begin the work of seeing themselves as less than perfect, but good enough. Professional support is key in a number of outcomes including a decrease in parental coping problems and fewer childhood behavior issues (Logsdon & Davis, 2003).

There is often an internal struggle for the woman as she comes to terms with her identity as a woman and a mother (Bergum, 1989; Ussher, 1989). Women have sought to deal with this conflict in feminist thought. Motherhood was initially thought to be the greatest obstacle to gaining autonomy (Everingham, 1994) and was often viewed like a disease (Derr, 1995). Mazzoni (2002) explores feminist theory about maternal deformity through her review of feminist literature about this subject. She focuses on Julia Kristeva's writings, which explore the idea of a woman's sense of identity being called into question by the nature of pregnancy where the body becomes both self and other.

Feminist family therapy has sought to find ways of healing women's narratives about being mothers to include all of their experiences and not just those that talk about the "perfect" mother (Weingarten, 1995). The therapist's role is to give voice to the mother's stories to encompass both the positive and the negative aspects of mothering (Derr, 1995; Price, 1988; Ussher, 1989; Weingarten, 1995). Weingarten (1995) looks at the narratives mothers give their lives and works to assist mothers with giving voice to their untold stories. Both personal journal writing and dream work are seen as important for finding the experiences mothers often do not dare to share. Wahler and Castlebury (2002) examine research about personal narratives and their structure as maps of the social ecosystem. They postulate that the stories that one tells allow "us to name ourselves and situate ourselves in the world" (p. 297). According to Wahler and Castlebury, listeners engage in clarifying the context of the story, which can change the simplicity with which the storyteller initially viewed their narrative. "We need to reconstruct our images of mothers to incorporate the

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