

## **Transitions of Motherhood among First Time Late Mothers: A Qualitative Investigation**

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**Abstract** - *This study explored on the experiences of first time late mothers as they go through the transition of motherhood for the first time. Research has shown that more and more women delay childbirth into their mid and late thirties and this brings forth as well the onset of late and off-time transition of motherhood among women. Despite the awareness of biological constraints and risks involved in late childbearing, the phenomenon continues to be observed among women these days. It is the aim of this study to provide a qualitative description of the experiences of first time late mothers. This involved 10 interview accounts of first time late mothers following a descriptive-qualitative design. Results revealed the following themes: Motherhood brings pleasant and positive affect; There are reproductive and maternal health concerns; There are adjustments to work and family life; Aging and medical issues are surfaced; Developed sense of self-care; Development of intensive mothering qualities; Experiences of Psychological Changes to Self; Focus on the “Here & Now”; There are protective & supportive factors for Coping and lastly; Reflections on Decisions of Transitioning into Motherhood. Discussion and implications are provided.*

**Keywords** – first time late mothers; motherhood transitions; descriptive; qualitative:

### **INTRODUCTION**

“Sometimes single and or childless friends want to know something about what it is like to be a parent. The best I can come up with is: after a child enters your home, your physical and mental feelings are heightened to degrees you never imagined possible. One has never before experienced such exhaustion, impatience, frustration, or fright. However, one has also never experienced such happiness, pride or love” (Santoro, 1992).

Santoro’s (1992) description of her motherhood experience is perhaps something many mothers out there could also relate to. It sounds so surreal and wonderful that women would jump at the very idea of being given such an opportunity. Yet, for these past decades, more and more women delay entering into marriage

and child rearing (Bingham, 2015; Williams, 2015; Williams, Sasster, Addo & Frech, 2015). More women after age 35 engage themselves in other pursuits in life such as getting higher education, building a career, and exploring the many other options life has to offer before entering motherhood. And although recent studies have also shown that these delays in childbearing have often been associated with negative health risks (Carolan, 2007; Gustafsson, 2003) as well as negative implications on career (Erfani, 2015; Miller, 2009; Kahn, Garcia-Manglano & Bianchi, 2014;) and social and political issues (Neugarten, 1964,1979; Mashewari, et al 2008). These explorations and worthwhile life pursuits more often than not extend up to the late 30’s, thus transitions that women experience when



they do decide to get married and have children only begin in midlife.

Developmentally motherhood is one such transition in a woman's life that marks the beginning and end of a role relationship. As with many other transitions in life, changes and adjustments have to be expected, and that these have implications in the psychological wellbeing of the individual. Given that the timing of this major life event is perceived as "off time" for the life course of middle-aged women, the life transition of motherhood would bring about challenges which have not been explored exhaustively. More so, experiences of these first-time late mothers and how these influence their development have been limited to biological challenges. As the researcher recognizes that development is not only influenced by one's biology, this study explores on other domains that may have impact on women's lives as they experience the transition of being first time late mothers.

This section presents a collection of various articles and researches on the experiences of older first-time mothers as they transition into motherhood.

#### A. Emerging Trend of Older Women Transitioning for the First Time into Motherhood

In a news article published online, Bingham (2015) expressed that middle aged mothers have overtaken the young in Britain's maternity wards. On a similar note, Carolan's (2006) research on late motherhood in Australia argued that like other developed nations, the country is exhibiting a trend towards later childbearing. The study revealed that participants identified adjustment to motherhood as a particularly challenging event. This study suggests that older women become mothers at a late age. This observation is also described by Gustafsson (2003) when he argued that the age at which women become mothers has increased to an all-time high in most European countries in the past decennia.

#### B. Transitions of Motherhood in the Life Course

Motherhood according to Santoro (1992) brings forth exhaustion, impatience, frustration or fright and at the same time happiness pride and love and all these are felt the moment when a woman becomes a parent to a child. As women enter into the transition of motherhood, typically childbearing is associated with it. In Darvill's (2008) study, childbearing is a significant transition, most especially for a first-time mother. It found out that women who experience first time late motherhood have challenges in areas of control, support and forming a family. A study of Nelson (2004) explored on the experiences of first-time mothering on women aged 36-48 on their first year transition to motherhood and found themes like "being ready", "planned intensity" and "how far we've come" as salient challenges. Williams (2015) also narrated about her experience of choosing to be a mother at age 50 which was challenging but worthwhile. In the study by Raikkonen et al., (2011), differences in timing in adult transitions like completion of education, full-time employment, having intimate relationships and having a child posed implications in one's psychological functioning. The results of this study revealed that women who experienced these transitions reported higher psychological wellbeing and self-esteem in midlife. Furthermore, those who had on time transitions showed similar results when compared to those who had late transitions. However, this difference leveled off when women got to midlife and no significant difference was observed. In a study conducted by Ruzza (2008) with women who experienced first time motherhood after age 40, he noted that these women's experiences were centered on the following themes: long journey to motherhood; overwhelming feelings of love and appreciation for the child; challenges in the experiences of loss and readiness for change; bringing good things to motherhood and motherhood experience brings good things; feelings of incompetence, changes in relationships, as well as decrease in sex life, awareness of the passage of time for concerns of the future; worry and

advices offered to younger women differ from their own paths.

### C. Challenges and Issues Associated with Transitions into Motherhood

In Carolan's (2005) study, she found out that among first time mothers over 35 years, they were concerned mainly on trying to do it correctly, vulnerability, finding their own way and being older. In a later study, Mashewari et al., (2007) also found out that health professionals like nurses and OB that although mothers were found to be aware of the health risks for experiencing first time motherhood at a late age, many of the information they have are erroneous and risky if not addressed and corrected.

Other than these challenges, other studies have also described noted impacts on the self, career and public policies of first-time late motherhood on women. In Darvill's (2008) study for example, it was found out that women who experience first time motherhood experiences difficulties as they experience loss of control over their own life and body, expressed need for support and the experience has led to their strong desire to build a family of their own. Similarly, in Morgan et al., (2012) they found out that midlife mothering has implications on developing intensive mothering, experiencing that "out of sync feeling" and challenges of menopause. In terms of its effect on their careers, Kahn (2014) showed that motherhood had penalty at midlife and that it is in fact costly to their careers. Added to that, Miller (2011) also expressed that motherhood timing have important implications to career. In the study, he found out that motherhood delay led to substantial increase in earnings, wages and working hours. However, in a different study by Morgan (2015) he found out that at the onset of transition into motherhood, women have shown to prefer to be with children than at work. With regards to public policies, the phenomenon of first time late mothers has shown negative consequences. In the study of Erfani et al., (2015) they found out that delayed transition to motherhood impacts fertility rates

and can cause costly public policies on health and education.

### D. Psychological and Developmental Changes in the Adult Years

Staudinger and Bluck (2001) argued that at midlife, most theoretical perspectives are centered on three general themes: time orientation, balance between work and relationship and lastly, opportunities for growth and generativity. For time orientation, Neugarten (1965) argued that timing is an important element in midlife. It is proposed that much of adulthood is governed by what is referred to as a "social clock" and that at midlife, one no longer measures life as time passed since birth but as time left to live. Furthermore, timing in midlife is an important component to consider as it poses several issues and crisis experienced but at the same time uses these challenges as salient features for developing a better sense of self and gaining insights. For the theme on balance between work and relationship, Jung and Levinson's theories proposed that in midlife, it becomes apparent that because adults are no longer seen as adolescents, they begin to develop more mature roles and adapt greater responsibilities, which in turn presents them with issues of balance, especially in maintaining value for work (seen as a precursor for later generativity) and relationships with family. For the theme of generativity, Havighurst and Erikson described midlife as that which has great implications in one's generativity drive and opportunities for growth. Havighurst (1972) viewed midlife as that which like any other phase constrained with achieving developmental tasks. Specifically, at midlife, one is expected to reach and maintain a satisfactory career level and at the same time maintain positive relations with others (spouse and children). Other than these, it is also expected for one who is at midlife to accept physiological changes of midlife (example is possible menopause), achieving adult social and civil responsibilities (example is paying taxes) as well developing satisfying leisure time activities (example gardening). Erikson on the other hand argued



that issues on parenting, marriage and career are salient features of adult life, even more so in midlife. But most salient of these issues is the issue of generativity, where he believed that it is in this period that the mature individual strives to share onto younger generations all that he has learned in life, in a way serving as mentor. These themes central to midlife have often been discussed but rarely has it focused on women.

Motherhood is described by many as an overwhelming and worthwhile transition in the life of a woman. Significant changes happen and these changes may pose several impacts on many aspects in a woman's life be it in her body and self, career, goals in life and psychological wellbeing. However, many of the researches done seem to focus on establishing that more and more women enter into motherhood at a later age, that is, when they enter the middle adulthood years already. There seems to be lacking data as to why women choose to delay first time motherhood and become first time late mothers despite the many well known disadvantages and risks that go with it. There also seems to be a scarcity of data explaining what women and what society thinks about women who are first time late mothers which could as well potentially impact women's lives and psychological wellbeing. The research on adult and aging has shown that more and more women delay marriage and childbirth and the unique transition experience of motherhood for "late mothers" has not received much research attention. Furthermore, the changes that occur in these "late mothers" have not been explored deeply on a developmental perspective. For these gaps, this current research is then initiated.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

This study explored on the experiences of 10 first time late mothers. Developmentally, this study explored on what it would mean for women over the age of 35 to experience motherhood for the first time? Specifically, the following question has been raised to provide an explicit account of these experiences:

1. What are the common themes of experience among first time late mothers?

### **MATERIALS AND METHOD**

This study used a descriptive and qualitative research design. Interview guide is used to provide descriptions on the common themes of the experiences of first time late mothers, their changes and challenges as they transitions of motherhood.

This study employed snowball and purposive convenience sampling technique to gather the participants for the study. It involved 10 women who have recently experienced the first time transition of motherhood in their lives. The participants need to be at least 35-55 years old and have at least experienced the transition of motherhood within the last 5 years and is working at the time of the motherhood transition.

To gather the data of this study, the researcher first had to develop the guide questions for the interview. Once the interview guide is approved and prepared, the researcher searched for women who have recently experienced the first time motherhood aged 35-55. Once the women were scheduled for interview, they were also asked if they knew of anyone else who had the same profile. This was done until the researcher gathered a total of 10 respondents. Consent forms were given prior to start of the interview. Afterwards, when respondents agreed to conditions of the interview, the interviews were then conducted on these first time late mothers. Responses were collected and analyzed to provide a qualitative description of the experiences of first time late mothers.

This study made use of an interview guide to gather descriptive and qualitative data on the experiences of first time late mothers. This included several open ended questions and checklists to provide as well some demographic data on the respondents. The responses were analyzed through frequency scores and thematic analysis.

To analyze the qualitative data gathered, thematic analysis is used to describe the salient features of the experiences of transitions of motherhood in midlife for older first time mothers.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Themes of Common Experiences of First Time Late Mothers

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Motherhood brings pleasant and positive affect  
There are reproductive and maternal health concerns  
There are adjustments to work and family life  
Aging and medical issues are surfaced  
Developed sense of self-care  
Development of intensive mothering qualities  
Experiences of Psychological Changes to Self  
Focus on the “Here & Now”  
There are protective & supportive factors for Coping  
Reflections on Decisions of Transitioning into Motherhood

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The results revealed that being a first time late mother entails the experiences of positive and pleasant affect. Respondents reported having to feel fulfillment, happiness and joy, as well as excitement, sense of pride, blessed, rewarding and feeling surprised.

Another theme uncovered is that there are reproductive and maternal health concerns. As noted, there were reproductive concerns like difficulties in conception, where respondents had to undergo hormone therapy and one had to do artificial insemination. Maternal health concerns included the risks of miscarriages and susceptibility to c-section child birthing process.

Adjustments to work and family life were also notable experiences for first time late mothers. The respondents reported to have experienced conflicts in work schedule and workload demands. Admittedly, the respondents described that such experiences made it difficult and challenging for them when they first transitioned into motherhood. Because they have established a career for themselves prior to being a first time late mother, they had acquired positions in the university and or jobs that demanded more work and responsibilities. When they became mothers at that late an age, they had to make significant decisions to forego some

jobs and even expressed to resign from work altogether to become a full time mother to the newborn. Not only were work conflicts an issue, family conflicts also become notable for the respondents. Specifically, the conflict had to do with the new roles and responsibilities acquired. As one respondent added, it was challenging because she had to be responsible for another person other than herself. She had been so used to simply looking after herself and deciding on matters all by herself. But at the time she got married and had the child, she had to listen and consider as well the decision of the other person-her husband – that is because he is also in the picture.

The next theme centered on aging and medical issues surfacing for first time late mothers. As one respondent noted, because she was not young anymore, the decline in stamina and vigor impedes her from being a mother she wants herself to be. Having young kids, boys at that who wanted to play all day long, do camping and physical sports with her and her husband was something she found herself difficult to be in. Medical issue also became apparent as respondents were diagnosed with chronic diseases like obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure/ hypertension and migraine.





However, because aging and medical issues surfaced, the respondents had developed a sense of self-care in them. As one respondent noted, she wanted to be healthier in order for her to be with her child longer and to perform her duties as a mom better. Another respondent described that when she became a mother, she had realized that she needed to live healthier through lifestyle change by quitting smoking and drinking altogether.

Another theme is imbibing qualities of “Intensive Mothering”. The respondents have all expressed that desire to be a hands-on mother and described how they wanted to do all things by themselves.

Experiencing the transition has brought about a felt change in the self in terms of both the physical dimension but also the psychological dimensions. Psychologically, the experience has brought about an improved sense of meaning in life and improved self-esteem. The transition has also brought the development of character traits and values into these First Time Late Mothers. Examples of reported values and character traits were being thrifter and more patient.

The experience of transition into motherhood for these First Time Late Mothers has brought about a change in goal and time orientation as well. As expressed by R1, her time orientation has forced her to focus on the here and now as she related “this big generation gap has forced me to focus on the here and now. My husband and I make an effort to seize every moment as if it were the last.”

There are also supportive resources for coping from the challenges experienced by the First Time Late Mothers. Among the several supportive factors identified by the respondents, majority expressed that having a supportive and loving husband was greatly helpful. As expressed by R6, “having a supporting husband helps a lot...” Family was also described as an important source of support, next to that are the Friends and last are the working environment and medication.

Lastly, the theme on reflections on decisions of transitioning into motherhood was observed.

Reflecting on their decisions to go into motherhood, the respondents noted that they would have done it earlier if life was ideal for them back then. By this it meant that if they only had secured jobs, better socio-economic status and if they had met their husbands earlier, then they would have entered into motherhood earlier. However, the respondents insisted that their decision to marry late and become mothers later is largely due to the fact that personal fulfillment of achievement and esteem needs were more important for them. Furthermore, it was important for them to have achieved financial security and psychological readiness first before they had decided to go into commitment, marriage and eventually motherhood. These factors were perceived to be important pre-requisites for the respondents in their entry to motherhood.

## **DISCUSSION**

The age profile of the respondents supports the trend observed among older women transitioning into motherhood for the first time. Although studies (Bingham, 2015; Carolan, 2006; Gustafsson, 2003) have described this trend to be most evident among developed countries only, this current study shows that the trend as well exists among developing nations like the Philippines. This is similarly observed in Iran where Erfani and Shojaie (2015) also reported a delayed transition into motherhood. This may imply that the trend of having First Time Late Mothers does not have economic conditions alone as an important feature but other components may play significant roles such as globalization, social and historical events.

Furthermore, the profile of the respondents revealed that they value intimacy which is supported by the adult development theory proposed by Erikson (1950). That strong desire to care for the child & awakened generative spirit to be the “perfect” moms are consistent with midlife generative tendencies as well. The increased satisfaction & meaning in life after experiencing the transition are also expected midlife experiences which are



consistent with the developmental theories discussed. It further supports Levinson's assumptions that first time late motherhood is likely to be marked with stress that typically should happen at early adulthood stage & other life transitions (marriage).

As the transition to motherhood among First Time Late Mothers has been viewed as a personally significant event with both positive and negative experiences, Levinson's (1996) theory of adult development is supported to reveal that it is likely to reflect stress of motherhood which typically should happen at an early stage in adult life and handle as well the transition that occurs at midlife. The challenges associated with the transition to motherhood for the first time described in this current study have as well paved the way to support the earlier studies that identified these as major themes (Morgan, et al., 2012; Carolan, 2005).

The decision to delay marriage and childbirth reflects the Life Course ideas that emphasize the agentic role of the individual in how his or her life will run across time. Although the respondents were aware that other women their age have grown children and that there are physiological risks and complications involved in the delayed transition, they emphasize their own will to enter into the transition and identified financial stability and psychological and emotional maturity as important features on when to enter into the transition. In Neugarten's (1964, 1979) theory of adult development, where she based her discussion of women's development through the timing-of-events- model, the results from this current study support the claims of Neugarten in the idea that rightness of the timing of any life event is accepted when it happens at a time it is expected. In the current study, the respondents argued that the experience is not off time as it is something they believed that happened at a time they were most ready and capable to, thus the event is accepted.

Exploring on the SST of Carstensen (1999), this current study has also paved the way to show its applications in the lives of these First Time Late Mothers. Indeed, when a major life

transition event happens at a later age, the time and goal orientation changes as well. Consistent with the theory, the respondents have as well expressed their desire to focus on the present and expressed intentions to forego future and knowledge driven goals and instead prioritize emotionally meaningful experiences like spending quality time with family and child.

### **Implications of the study**

The study revealed that being first time late mothers is associated with physiological and health risks that may impede the development of the individual. It is therefore important for these women to get appropriate and adequate health assistance to ensure optimal development. Furthermore, as supportive factors were identified, it is important to build on these sources of support and learn to strengthen them to buffer the challenges and difficulties associated with first time late mothering.

The results of the study that revealed the experienced difficulties and challenges of first time late mothers would serve as good entry points for counselors, psychologists, mental health professionals and even those in the medical fields such as OB's and nurses to build evidence-based interventions that help address those concerns. Furthermore, research on exploring the psychological wellbeing of first time late mothers is recommended for future studies.

The insights on changes in time and goal orientation for the first time late mothers would also be a descriptive account to support the Socio-emotional Selectivity Theory. Although the theory stipulates that older adults experience such changes more markedly due to perceived less time left in life, the results of the current study has described similar dilemma of limited time left. Thus, it would be a good opportunity to explore on a hypothesis testing if being first time late mothers (limited time left to be with children due to late age) would lead to changes in time and goal orientation. It would be best if an empirical research be undertaken to test the hypothesis of the theory for this particular population.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Transition to motherhood among First Time Late Mothers is viewed as a personally significant event that brings forth psychological changes as well as physical changes. It is not always a pleasant experience as it is marked with negative experiences too. However, even with challenges identified, there are supportive resources present among First Time Late Mothers that helped them cope. Furthermore, despite the realization of limited time left with child, respondents emphasize their agency over the transition to reflect psychological maturity & financial stability as important criteria. Being a mother at a late age is not perceived as “off time” for the respondents as it is a time they believed they most ready and able to be a mother. Lastly, it has imbibed in them certain qualities which they feel they need to be, that is, being the best mother they can be. Ultimately, motherhood among First Time Late Mothers is viewed as a worthwhile event to wait for that even if marked with difficulties it is a psychologically important developmental transition for women.

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