

Araştırma Makalesi/ Research Article

# Postpartum Women's Perceptions of the Concept of Motherhood: A Metaphorical Study

## Doğum Sonu Dönemdeki Kadınların Anne Olmak Kavramına İlişkin Algıları: Metaforik Bir Çalışma

Huriye Altıncaynak<sup>1</sup>  Hafize Dağ Tüzmen<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>KTO Karatay University, Institute of Health Sciences, Konya, TÜRKİYE

<sup>2</sup>KTO Karatay University, Faculty of Health Sciences, Department of Midwifery, Konya, TÜRKİYE

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The aim of this research is to discover postnatal women's conceptions of 'becoming a mother' using metaphors.

**Methods:** The study was conducted using the phenomenological design, which is one of the qualitative research methods. The study's data were collected between 31 March 2023 and 29 June 2023 by utilizing a personal information form as well as a semi-structured interview form with 88 women living in Konya province, between 4-12 months postpartum, who voluntarily participated in the study. Each participant was asked to complete the sentence's blanks 'Being a mum.....because it's similar'. The data were analysed using qualitative (content analysis) and quantitative research methods. Ethics committee permission was obtained to conduct the research.

**Results:** When the participants' sociodemographic data were investigated, it was discovered that the average age was 28.28±4.93, 40.9% were university graduates or above, 75% lived in the provincial centre, 71.6% has a medium income, and 60.2% had a cesarean section. The participants were found to have produced 65 analogies pertaining to the idea of "motherhood." 86.15% of the metaphors associated with the idea of motherhood were found to be conceptualized as opinions.

**Conclusions:** It shows that women in the postpartum period perceive the role of motherhood as a social and individual role positively. It is suggestion that nurses and midwives should support and contribute to the development of women's maternal role.

**Keywords:** Maternal health, metaphor, postpartum period

### ÖZ

**Amaç:** Bu çalışmanın amacı, doğum sonrası kadınların 'anne olma' kavramlarını metaforlar kullanarak ortaya çıkarmaktır.

**Yöntem:** Çalışma, nitel araştırma yöntemlerinden biri olan "fenomenolojik (olgubilim) deseni kullanılarak yapılmıştır. Çalışmanın verileri 31 Mart 2023-29 Haziran 2023 tarihleri arasında Konya ilinde yaşayan, doğum sonrası 4-12 ay arasında olan ve çalışmaya gönüllü olarak katılan 88 kadın ile kişisel bilgi formu ve yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme formu kullanılarak toplanmıştır. Her bir katılımcıdan 'Anne olmak..... benzer çünkü' cümlesindeki boşlukları doldurmaları istenmiştir. Veriler nitel (içerik analizi) ve nicel araştırma yöntemleri kullanılarak analiz edilmiştir. Araştırmanın yürütülmesi için etik kurul izni alınmıştır.

**Bulgular:** Katılımcıların sosyodemografik verileri incelendiğinde yaş ortalamasının 28.28±4.93 olduğu, %40.9'unun üniversite ve üzeri mezunu olduğu, %75'inin il merkezinde yaşadığı, %71.6'sının gelirinin orta olduğu ve %60.2'sinin sezaryen doğum yaptığı tespit edilmiştir. Katılımcıların "annelik" fikrine ilişkin 65 benzetme ürettiği tespit edilmiştir. Annelik fikri ile ilişkilendirilen metaforların %86.15'inin düşünce olarak kavramsallaştırıldığı görülmüştür.

**Sonuç:** Postpartum dönemdeki kadınların annelik rolünü toplumsal ve bireysel bir rol olarak olumlu algıladıklarını göstermektedir. Hemşire ve ebelerin kadınların annelik rolünü desteklemeleri ve gelişimine katkıda bulunmaları önerilmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Anne sağlığı, metafor, postpartum dönem

**ORCID IDs of the authors:** HA: 0000-0001-8853-6448; HDT: 0000-0001-7791-7536

**Sorumlu yazar/Corresponding author:** Huriye Altıncaynak

KTO Karatay University Institute of Health Sciences, Master's student, Konya, TÜRKİYE

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**e-posta/e-mail:** asaltıncaynak@hotmail.com

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## Introduction

The postnatal period is a time for the mother and father to care for the baby, create a safe environment, communicate, learn new roles, develop family sensitivity and cope with problems related to the baby (Gökdoğan Keleş et al., 2020). The postnatal period can be experienced as an extremely positive and satisfying period for the family, a period in which family ties are strengthened, or it might be perceived as a time of crisis (Taşkın, 2023; Yıldırım et al., 2011).

Although becoming a mother is a joyous occasion for a woman, it is also recognized as a key transition period since it involves many obligations, new duties, and a period of change (Çiğdem, 2022; Deliktaş et al., 2015; Monteiro et al., 2022). The roles and responsibilities associated with motherhood, which are expected to be multifaceted, as well as the efforts to act in a way that complies with the new role expected of her, may cause women to experience fear/anxiety about the process of becoming accustomed to the role of motherhood, as well as self-confidence issues (Durham and Chapman, 2013; Evcili, 2018).

Discussions about parenting frequently serve as the foundation for a shared understanding. Idealized images of mothers exist in all communities, and what they ought to refrain from doing is frequently readily available and, in general, similar across cultures. A "good mother" fosters the well-being and growth of her children and is virtually always patient, protective, caring, and generous, whether prescribed by psychologists or learned by regular people all over the world (Barlow and Chapin, 2010). Motherhood constitutes a woman's social identity. When a woman identifies herself as a mother, joins a social group of mothers, and shapes her feelings, thoughts, and behaviours under the identity of motherhood, she will have gained a social identity as a mother. According to Ramona Thieme Mercer's idea of motherhood, the process of becoming a mother is a mental experience for women (Çolak et al., 2021; Gökçek and Boyacıoğlu, 2023).

Interpreting and giving meaning to sensations is the process of perception, which is one of the mental experiences. Perception occurs first in the brain for these sensations and the resulting product is called perception. In the perception process, the brain is influenced by the surroundings of the person, expectations for the situation, culture, and social structure. In this context, women's factors like as age influence people's perceptions of parenthood,

planned pregnancy, health status of the baby, birth environment, social environment, presence of support, social role, and culture (Fraser and Hughes, 2009). The perception of motherhood is also influenced by the way pregnancy occurs (Boz, Teskereci and Akgün, 2021). The concept of motherhood is most frequently encountered in the form of the metaphor of motherhood is a positive/negative emotion (İbe Akcan and Aygül, 2022).

Metaphor is formed by combining the words meta and pherein, which are derived from the Latin and Greek roots metaphore. Meta means beyond, excessive and pherein means to carry, to burden (Apak and Yılkan, 2020). Since time immemorial, the use of metaphor has been the process of substituting another meaning for a certain phenomenon and attributing metaphorical meaning in various aspects. The use of metaphor is a powerful mental tool that is useful in understanding and explaining a highly abstract, complex and theoretical phenomenon, in general, the way human beings comprehend the world (Kılcan, 2021). It is among the methods as well employed to understand and explain perceptions (Kurtdele-Fidan and Özyayın, 2019). According to research, it is stated that how motherhood is perceived is influenced by the age of becoming a mother, the support of the social environment, socio-economic level and stress factors (Aksoy and Dikmen, 2009). According to another study, women concentrated on the aspects of motherhood that required sacrifice, worry or fear, responsibility, and fulfillment or happiness. It was found that women perceived motherhood mostly as extra burdens and responsibilities imposed on them, and the least perceived the sacrificing and giving aspect of motherhood (Gökçek and Boyacıoğlu, 2023).

Based on all the aim of this research is to define these terms using metaphors, the perceptions and thoughts of women between 0 and 12 months postpartum regarding parenting. It is anticipated that the mother impressions of the women obtained from the study's results will inform the care that nurses and midwives provide for the 4–12 month baby follow-up, prenatal care, support and follow-up during childbirth, and postnatal puerperium care.

## Method Design

This study was conducted in a descriptive phenomenology design (Kıral, 2021), one of the qualitative research designs, in order to reveal

women's perceptions of motherhood. The metaphor method, one of the qualitative data collection tools, was used to collect strong and rich data on the subject.

### **Participants**

Mothers between the ages of 18 and 49 who were between 4 and 12 months postpartum made up the study's population. The sample was chosen using the criterion sampling approach, one of the deliberate sampling techniques. This sampling technique determines all circumstances that satisfy a preset set of criteria (Creswell, 2013). The study group was limited to mothers who could speak and comprehend Turkish, had a baby between the ages of 4 and 12 months, gave informed consent, and willingly accepted to take part in the research. Through extensive interviews with the sample, data were gathered. Interviews went on till there was enough amount of data. The study was completed with 88 mothers.

### **Data Collection**

The study's data was acquired between March 31, 2023, and June 29, 2023, using a semi-structured interview form and a personal information form. The two-part sentence completion question in the semi-structured form was created in accordance with the literature. The first section of the sentence says it is asked using fill-in-the-blank worksheets that women liken their views on motherhood (Being a mother is similar to .....). The second portion of the statement reads, the reason why individuals compare motherhood to motherhood is asked and they are asked to explain because (because.....). Completing the blank space after the word is critical in terms of displaying the meaning and content behind the metaphor. In the form, the metaphors, and the meaning behind them were identified with the sentence "I think being a mother is similar to....., because.....". Mothers who fulfilled the requirements for inclusion were invited to take part in the interview. An announcement about the study was made on social media to maximize participation. The interviews were carried out by the chief investigator, who was unknown to the mother but introduced herself as the researcher. Data were collected through one-on-one interviews with the mothers; however, every effort was made to include women from different demographic backgrounds as much as possible. Interviews generally lasted approximately 1 hour. For one-on-one interviews, mothers preferred to be interviewed by telephone in their own homes, which offered a familiar and comfortable environment. Familiar settings helped

facilitate a relaxed and open discussion, which supported more insightful and detailed discussion and thus richer data collection. Every interview was captured digitally, transcribed and coded with consent and kept confidential.

### **Data Analysis**

This study was conducted using data and metaphors from 90 participants. Sociodemographic characteristics were examined with the SPSS program (27.0) (SPSS, Inc., Chicago, IL, USA) and numbers and percentages were used to present statistical data. Qualitative data were analyzed in MAXQDA 10 and documents were reviewed until data saturation was reached (Guest et al., 2020; Virginia and Clarke, 2021). The data was analyzed using the content analysis approach in compliance with the qualitative study design. The primary aim of content analysis is to identify the concepts and connections that best explain the data that has been gathered. Throughout this procedure, concepts and themes pertaining to the topic under study were discovered by thoroughly analyzing the data. Comparable information was logically gathered, arranged, and analyzed. (Elo et al., 2014). The metaphors defined by the participants were analyzed and interpreted in four stages: identification, elimination, categorization, validity, and reliability. This study adhered to the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) (Tong et al., 2007).

#### **Stage 1. Identification**

Currently, the metaphors produced by the mothers were listed in alphabetical order. To that end, it was determined whether every woman clearly expressed a particular metaphor. The metaphor stated at this point on paper by women between 4-12 months postpartum was simply coded.

#### **Stage 2. Elimination**

At this point, each metaphor was considered analysed using "content analysis" and "metaphor analysis" methods, and its parallels and differences with other metaphors were evaluated. Each metaphor written by women between 4 and 12 years postpartum was studied for this purpose, and each metaphorical picture was examined in terms of the following three concepts: (1) the metaphor's topic; (2) its source; and (3) the connection between the subject and the metaphor's source. We excluded 2 forms, including statements that were merely analogical or did not include the source of the metaphor (n = 2) or metaphors that did not make sense or did not help to improve knowledge of the topic "being a mother is like ..... because .....". The

response sheets extracted by the researchers did not include statements that served the purpose of the study.

### **Stage 3. Categorization**

In this stage after the elimination phase, metaphors concerning the concept of being a mother were reviewed in terms of their shared traits, taking into account the data collected. According to the metaphor lists, each metaphor produced by women was grouped under two categories.

### **Stage 4. Validity and Reliability**

One of the most important criticisms of qualitative studies is the problem of validity and reliability. First of all, it is important to ensure validity or credibility in qualitative studies. Because it is an important criterion for ensuring validity in a study that researchers report the information gathered in-depth and explain how they obtained the results (Trainor and Graue, 2013). Therefore, how the data were analyzed in this study is explained in detail in the methodology section. To guarantee the validity of the research, both researchers worked in harmony from the very beginning and reached a compromise when there were disagreements. The first author first coded the data independently. The other authors then reviewed the analysis, such as whether the codes were consistent with each other and whether they belonged to each category. The metaphors were then categorised and finalised. Expert opinion was requested from a person trained in qualitative research design and an expert in midwifery. The similarity between experts and researchers regarding the coded data sets determined the confidence level of the research. This resemblance, which the Miles and Huberman model refers to as internal consistency and is understood as the decoders' agreement, was calculated using the following formula:  $\Delta = C \div (C + \partial) \times 100$ . In this formula,  $\Delta$  is the confidence coefficient,  $C$  is the number of topics/terms covered consensus was reached, and  $\partial$  is the number of topics/terms covered consensus was not reached. According to the coding control that ensures internal consistency, the level of consensus between the examiners is expected to be at least 80% (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). In this study, the confidence level according to the formula is 93%.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The University Research Ethics Committee granted ethics approval (31 March 2023). The four basic principles of ethical research: respect for persons, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice were followed throughout the study (Beauchamp

and Childress, 2019). Before data collection, participants were provided with written study information. The lead researcher ensured that all women's participants could voluntarily discontinue their participation at any moment.

### **Results**

Data on the "role of motherhood in the postpartum period" were obtained as a consequence of the information gathered for the purpose of the study. When the sociodemographic information of the participants was examined, it was found that the mean age was  $28.28 \pm 4.93$  years, 40.9% were university graduates, 75% resided in the provincial center, 71.6% had a medium income level, and 60.2% had a cesarean delivery. It was observed that 2.9% of the women had had a previous miscarriage, 37.5% had only one pregnancy, 40.9% had a living child and 36.4% had sleep problems (Table 1).

#### **Category 1: Positive Perceptions of Women**

Based on the study's conclusions, postpartum mothers produced 56 metaphors on the perception of motherhood role. As a common feature of the metaphors produced, it was emphasized that the perception of being a postpartum mother is similar to renewal, twin sister, miracle, something unique, superhero, heart, angel, and fruit tree. "Renewal (3), flower garden (1), peach tree (1), sparrow's tears (1), twin sisters (2), teacher (1), heavenly angel on earth (1), gardener (1), seasons (1), a delicious meal (1), miracle (2), shown as something unique (4), a unique gift (1), planting a sapling (1), giving fruit (1), half an apple (1), superhero (2), soldier (1), loyal friend (1), compassion (1), stone in the stream (1), making a cake (1), brother (1), beautiful feeling to endure all hardships (1), salt of the dish (1), phone app (1), being a candle (1), being the earth (1), rose (1), heart (2), angel (3), pillow (1), medicine (1), medicine (1), pacifier (1), being a bird (1), most altruistic position (1), Embracing the universe (1), "Holding on to life for your children no matter what, living for them (1), owning a house (1), planting a tree (1), fruit tree (2), tree (1), the greatest feeling that can be given to a woman (1)" metaphors were produced by 56 mothers.

*Being a mother is like being a superhero because when my child asks for something, even if it is very difficult, I find the strength to do it and I am ready to do whatever he/she asks (K31).*

*Being a mother is like being a soldier because she is ready to do anything for her child (K33).*



**Table 1.** Sociodemographic characteristics of the participants (n: 88)

Sociodemographic characteristics	X±SS
Age	28.28 ± 4.93
	N(%)
<b>Education status</b>	
Primary School	10 (%11.4)
Middle School	19 (%21.6)
High School	23 (%26.1)
University and above	36 (%40.9)
<b>Place of residence</b>	
Province	66 (%75.0)
District	22 (%25.0)
<b>Income level</b>	
Low	8 (%9.1)
Moderate	63 (%71.6)
High	17 (%19.3)
<b>Mode of delivery</b>	
Caesarean section	53 (%60.2)
Vaginal birth	35 (%39.8)
<b>Number of pregnancies</b>	
1 pregnancy	33(%37.5)
2 pregnancies	30(%34.1)
3pregnancies and above	25(%28.4)
<b>Number of living children</b>	
1 child	36 (%40.9)
2 children	31 (%35.2)
3 children	21 (%23.9)
<b>Miscarriage</b>	
Yes	19 (%21.9)
No	69 (%78.4)
<b>Abortion</b>	
Yes	10 (%11.4)
No	78 (%88.6)
<b>Relationship status with partner</b>	
Good	66 (%75.0)
Moderate	17 (%19.3)
Bad	5 (%5.7)
<b>Sleep quality</b>	
Good	19 (%21.6)
Moderate	37 (%42.0)
Bad	32 (%36.4)

*I think being a mom is like a phone app, because the name is the same, it's just a version update, and you suddenly load a lot of features into your memory that you didn't know you had, but that you didn't have the opportunity to discover before (for example, being able to stay awake for days without sleeping, being able to hold your toilet forever) (K42).*

*I think being a mother is like being a candle, because just like a candle has to melt to give light to your surroundings, a mother has to compromise*

*herself to keep her bond with her child strong and to make him feel safe and happy (K43).*

*Being a mother is like being soil, because like a seed thrown into the soil, it first sprouts and then slowly grows inside the baby, and the mother starts to strive for her child and wish the best for him or her while the baby is still in the womb (K48).*

*Being a mother is like a pacifier because I am always there when my daughter sleeps, wakes up, eats, plays, gets sick, is happy, has difficult days, in short, wherever her pacifier is, I am there just like her (K64).*

### Category 2: Negative Perceptions of Women

Based on the study's results, it is evident that postpartum mothers have negative thoughts about the postpartum period and produce metaphors in accordance with this perception. There is no common metaphor among the metaphors produced. There are nine negative metaphors produced by mothers at the end of childbirth, including "boss (1), teacher (1), ambivalent feelings (1), full-time worker (1), walking on ice (1), taking responsibility (1), doing a very heavy job (1), being a worker for life (1), being imprisoned (1)".

*Being a mother is like being a boss, just as a boss manages his employees, a mother takes responsibility for her children and tries to manage them for life (K4).*

*Being a mother is similar to being a teacher because a teacher has to teach students and a mother has to take care of her children (K12).*

*Being a mother is like being a full-time worker because you have to organize your life around your baby who needs you all the time and you hardly have time for yourself (K32).*

*Being a mother is like being a worker because there is no day and night, you have to work all the time (K61).*

*Being a mother is like walking on ice because the responsibility is heavy, any mistake and your child will slip out of your hands (K74).*

*Being a mother is like being in prisoner because your life is shaped accordingly, you have no private life, no individual life (K80).*

### Discussion

Acquisition of the role of motherhood is a concept that is influenced by environmental and cultural contexts, and each woman's interpretation of it is unique (Deliktaş et al., 2015). The purpose of this study was to look into the following issues perceptions of women in the postnatal period of 4-12 months about the concept of being a mother.

When the metaphors were analysed descriptively, 56 positive maternal role perceptions and nine negative maternal role perceptions were determined. The perceptions expressed in the study were grouped by the investigators. As stated by the grouping results, it was seen that women's positive perceptions of the motherhood role and the success of motherhood acquisition were common. In the metaphors produced, they likened being a mother to perceptions such as being renewed, a superhero, and a twin sister. In the studies conducted on women's perception of motherhood, it was determined that women perceived motherhood as a happy, loving, miraculous, and indescribable feeling (Benza and Liamputtong, 2017; Fouquier, 2011; Hoffmann et al., 2021; Prikhidko and Swank, 2018). Upon reviewing the literature, it becomes evident that most women produce metaphors of happiness and satisfaction towards motherhood (Gökçek and Boyacıoğlu, 2023) women define motherhood as a role that brings joy, love and respect (Çebi and Sarıköse, 2021), motherhood is a completely different feeling, a sacred role, a profession that requires sacrifice and the significance they ascribe to the child comes to the fore (Tuğrul, 2019), it was observed that women described motherhood as blissful despite its difficulties (Bermúdez et al., 2014). Our results are consistent with those of other research papers in the literature.

Transition to motherhood can be welcomed positively within the family, nevertheless, occasionally it can also be reflected as a crisis in family life (Deliktaş et al., 2015). Furthermore this experience of motherhood is challenging and exhausting and may cause women to have a negative perspective on the concept of motherhood. Based on the study's conclusions, mothers also produced metaphors such as boss, teacher, ambivalent feelings, full-time worker, walking on ice, taking responsibility, doing a very heavy job, and being a worker for life, and imprisonment. Upon reviewing the literature, it is found that women drew attention to the aspects of motherhood that require responsibility (Shloim et al., 2020), women expressed motherhood as a job that increases responsibility (Tuğrul, 2019), perception of motherhood is generally oriented towards the duties and responsibilities of motherhood (Gökçek and Boyacıoğlu, 2023), women perceive motherhood as responsibility, teaching the child about life, creating a safe environment and supporting the child for life (Uçakçı Asalioğlu et al., 2020), women defined motherhood in terms of its responsible aspects

(Prikhidko and Swank, 2018). Although the current research is comparable to the literature, it reveals that women perceive the concept of motherhood as an obligation to be fulfilled and as being a constant giver. This result is assumed to be the outcome of the existence of a social perception that the responsibility for the growth, development, and upbringing of the child is fulfilled by the mother.

### Limitations

The sample of the study was limited to mothers who were 4–12 months postpartum, and it is not known whether the women conceived naturally or with IVF treatment, which constitutes the limitations of the study.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

In the metaphors examined it was observed in the study that the perception of motherhood was generally evaluated as positive. It is thought that nurses and midwives have an important role in preventing possible problems by evaluating women's perception of the concept of motherhood and their adaptation to the maternal role at an early stage. This study will support health professionals to propose solutions to the problems that may arise due to their close contact with mothers. In addition, for future studies, researchers are recommended to increase the number of samples and to collect data with different qualitative or quantitative analyses and techniques.

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**Ethics Committee Approval:** In order to carry out the research, the KTO Karatay University Faculty of Medicine, Drug and Non-Medical Device Research Ethics Committee approved the study on March 31, 2023 (Decision no: 2023/026).

**Peer-review:** External referee evaluation.

**Author Contributions:** Idea/concept: HA, HDT; Design: HA, HDT; Consulting: HDT; Data collection and/or Data Processing: HA, HDT; Analysis and/or Interpretation: HA, HDT; Source Search, HA, HDT; Writing of the Article: HA, HDT; Critical review: HDT.

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**What did the study add to the literature?**

- The perceptions among women who have recently given birth about 'becoming a mother' were revealed through metaphors.
- It was observed that women's perceptions of the concept of becoming mother were conceptualized as positive views.
- With this study, it is thought that awareness has been raised by health professionals to increase education and counseling programs to improve the perception of motherhood in a positive way.

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