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Making existential meaning in transition to motherhood—A scoping review

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ABSTRACT

Objective: to provide a thematic overview of the existing literature on existential meaning-making related to transition to motherhood among mothers of full term born babies in Western oriented countries and to discuss the themes from a existential psychology perspective.

Design: the review follows the approach of a scoping review. Systematic searches in the electronic databases PubMed, CINAHL and PsycINFO were combined with manual and electronic searches for related references. Studies published between 1990 and 2010 examining dimensions of existential meaning-making in transition to motherhood were selected. Eleven papers were included in the synthesis, all using qualitative interviews. The following data were extracted from each study: (a) author(s), year of publication, study location, (b) aims of the study, (c) participants, (d) research design, (e) data collection method, (f) outcome measures, and (g) results.

Measurements: the studies were synthesised in a thematisation on the basis of the existential psychotherapist and philosopher Emmy van Deurzen's concepts of four interwoven life dimensions, through which we experience, interpret, and act in the world: Umwelt, Mitwelt, Eigenwelt, and Überwelt.

Key conclusions: the findings in this review suggest that transition to motherhood is considered a pivotal and paradoxical life event. Through the lens of existential psychology it can be interpreted as an existentially changing event, reorganising values and what makes life worth living, and to some women also being interpreted as a spiritual experience. However, in present maternity services there is a predominant focus on biomedical issues, which sets the arena for motherhood transition, and the issues related to potentially existentially changing experiences, are not considered important. Without an integrative approach, where personal meaning-making issues are discussed, the potential for growth during existential authenticity is not utilised. Transition to motherhood raises existential questions about mortality and meaning of life, and we should explore this field in research and in clinical work.

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Introduction

Becoming a mother is a significant life event. It is a transition in life, where existential considerations regarding the meaning of life are reinvigorated. Through the lens of existential psychology making meaning of life and of life circumstances are essential for humans, and constitute a powerful motivation for living (Frankl, 1978; Yalom, 1980; Jacobsen, 2011). In the present paper meaning relates to fundamental life conditions and their importance in peoples' lives.

It refers to making meaning of life in the existential tradition of psychology/philosophy, which is rooted mainly in a European thought. In this tradition there is a predominant focus on meaning making related to secular worldviews, albeit also spiritual and religious dimensions can be encompassed (La Cour and Hvidt, 2010). Making meaning encourages an active questioning of life conditions with a fundamental awareness of human fragility and mortality which allows people to live authentic lives (Van Deurzen, 2007; Jacobsen, 2009; Karpatschhof and Katzenelson, 2011).

The birth of a child has been regarded as one of the greatest acts of humanity (Ayers-Gould, 2000). In this perspective becoming a mother may change the meaning of life (Nichols, 1996; Thomas, 2001; Gaskin, 2002; Kitzinger, 2005). Questions about meaning of life may be invigorated in transition to motherhood,

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and yet we only know very little about what these questions might mean to new mothers. Making meaning of life may be closely linked to both existential and spiritual considerations. The existing research focusing on meaning related to becoming a mother have covered various factors related to making meaning, and are mainly focused on the experience of giving birth per se (Budin, 2001; Waldenstrom, 2003; Kitzinger, 2011; Martin and Fleming, 2011). This paper provides an overview and a thematic analysis of the existing literature that thus focuses on existential meaning-making in the transition to motherhood.

Motherhood transition as a life event

Motherhood transition is considered an event that may lead to changes in our values and ideas of what creates meaning in life (Becker and Hofmeister, 2001; McCullough et al., 2005; Andersen et al., 2011). There are rich anthropological, sociological, psychological, and theological traditions for exploring childbirth and early motherhood (Stern, 1999; Klassen, 2001; Odent, 2002; Downe, 2008; Leeds and Hargreaves, 2008). Birth as a pivotal life event was stressed by the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, who refers to pregnancy rites and birth rites as pivotal rites in most cultures (Van Gennep, 1981). The period of transition is the facilitation of a gradual psychological opening to profound social change. The American anthropologist Davis-Floyd (2003) describes the transitional status

implies that transition to motherhood is an event that takes place at every birth, and not only for first time mothers.

Theoretical perspective

The perspective of this paper derives from existential psychology. One of the important issues in the existential tradition is the matter of life itself – being in the world and clarifying what it means to be alive (Binswanger, 1963; Frankl, 1963; Yalom, 1980; Van Deurzen, 2007). Being in the world is a complicated concept from the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) pointing at the understanding of human existence. If we want to understand fundamental aspects of what it means to be alive, we will have to take peoples immediate doings and their openness towards the world into account, since we as humans must be understood in the light of our experiences (Rendtorff, 2004). According to the existential psychotherapist and philosopher Emmy van Deurzen there are four basic dimensions of life (Van Deurzen-Smith, 1984). Van Deurzen refers to the Swiss psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger's work on three different life dimensions. She used his concepts, and added a fourth dimension, the 'Überwelt' (Binswanger, 1963; Van Deurzen-Smith, 1984; Van Deurzen, 2007).

Umwelt	Mitwelt	Eigenwelt	Überwelt
The physical dimension in which we relate to the natural world around us, including our body. In this dimension we are confronted with limitations of natural boundaries (as in old age or bodily constraints related to being pregnant).	The social dimension in which we relate to others, including culture, class and race. Despite the possibility of different forms of belonging, power or prestige in our lives, we are eventually confronted with aloneness and failure.	The psychological dimension in which we relate to ourselves, including views about the past and the future. It includes a search for an authentic self, but during a lifespan we will be confronted with life events putting our inner selves at stake, for example being in transition to motherhood or facing personal loss and death.	The spiritual dimension. This dimension encompasses the fundament of values and ideals strong enough to live or die for. Despite the name Überwelt, the dimension is not necessarily related to a transcendent dimension, it also covers immanent ideals. Some people make meaning through a religious worldview, whereas others make meaning through a secular worldview. In this dimension we are confronted with the possibility of nothingness in our aim to reach something of eternal character.

of birthing women being at once both powerful and vulnerable. Davis-Floyd states that childbirth as a rite of passage has '... tremendous cognitive significance for the mother in American society... It also reflects and reinforces core values of society' (Davis-Floyd, 2003, p. 305). The experience of pregnancy and birth cannot be understood as mere experiences in a woman's life, but must also be conceptualised as manifestations of core values of any society. These values are internalised in the health care system in what Davis-Floyd calls the 'technocratic' model of care, which is in opposition to the 'wholistic' model of care (Davis-Floyd, 2003). The 'technocratic' model of care implies a positivistic, body-as-a-machine, risk-oriented, male-dominated, institutionalised, technology-focused perspective on childbirth, which leaves out an integrating, wholistic, approach, in which perspectives related to personal experiences and feelings also have value (Davis-Floyd, 2003).

We focus specifically on existential meaning related to transition to motherhood, using the term motherhood transition to include the period of birth and the early postnatal period. This

The four dimensions are interwoven, and through them we experience, interpret, and act in the world. In the present paper existential meaning-making is conceptualised as created through van Deurzen's four life dimensions. In order to explore transition to motherhood, the idea of the four life dimensions is chosen as a conceptual framework. The objective of this study is to review knowledge and to thematically analyse literature about existential meaning-making related to transition to motherhood among mothers of full term born babies in Western oriented countries.

Methods

A scoping review was an appropriate method, since it offered a way of identifying gaps in a research area and mapping key concepts. Although the scoping review methodology is still in the development stages, Arksey and O'malley (2005) present a clearly defined, systematic approach to conducting scoping

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