

AM I A GOOD MOTHER? AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF MOTHERING

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ABSTRACT

Research has always focused on identifying parenting styles adopted by parents of adolescents to find their association with parent-adolescent relationships, yet the experience of parenting a child at a sensitive age and stage is much more complex. This study aimed to explore the lived experience of mothers handling 11-15 years old adolescents and the troubles they go through. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 7 mothers of adolescents. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), two superordinate themes were generated i.e., apprehensions and parental self-doubt. These superordinate themes had 10 sub-themes. The results revealed that mothers go down memory lane and compare their child with their childhood and use certain strategies which fail. This leads to loss of control in the mothers and their associated apprehensions and helplessness leads them to question themselves in the maternal role.

Keywords. mothers, adolescents, parenting, self-doubt, maternal role

INTRODUCTION

The main responsibility of a mother is child care (Feasey, 2017). Even though the responsibility is shared, the primary accountability for arranging and managing the care of the child is of the mother's (Feasey, 2017; Pederson, 2016). Mothers are held accountable for their child's behaviour which can become distressing for the mother. There are numerous day to day challenges a mother has to face, for example, household management, organizing schedules for the family and maintaining order in the home (Ahn et al., 2017). Apart from these challenges, the most difficult and distressing challenge a mother has to face is mothering (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019), especially mothering an adolescent. This is because adolescents are in a critical developmental age and stage in which emotional adjustment and behavioural management become a point of concern for not just the adolescent but the family as well. As the prime responsibility lies on the shoulders of the mother, the mother is expected to deal with the adolescent's emotional adjustment. Ciciolla and Luthar (2019) explain that the captain of household and management (i.e. mother) does not get distressed by day to day tasks as much as by her mothering duties. The strain on the mental and personal well-being of mothers increases when there is a lack of support for the mother. Even though the responsibility of raising children must be shared, the primary accountability is of the mothers in the given matter (Feasey, 2017; Pederson, 2016). In Pakistani culture, when a child misbehaves, has health concerns or difficulties in general, it is always the mother who faces judgment over her mothering skills, literacy and the way she was brought up by her parents (Shahid et al., 2020; Asim & Nawaz, 2018). The mother faces societal and familial disapproval which may lead to embarrassment and resentment.

Another common expectation from the mother is that the child's needs must take priority over hers. The selfless mother who is expected to provide unconditional love and support for the family may too develop ambivalence towards her children, especially when the stress is unbearable and there is lack of support (Almond, 2011). Chapman and Gubi (2019) report in their study that maternal ambivalence

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resulted from the loss of previous self, boredom and feelings of resentment which led to confusion in the mothers as they had ideal expectations of motherhood.

Taking a step back and trying to understand where motherhood comes from, the traditional mothering ideology found, states that the mother should be at home full time and should have domestic aspirations. This historically compromised concept of motherhood contradicts with the present challenges (like personal, professional or social) faced by the mothers in which those who fail to fit the defined traditional maternal role fall short in meeting the social expectation of “good mothering” or “proper woman” (Silverio et al., 2021; Johnston & Swanson, 2006). These historical and traditional ideologies define the love of a mother as unconditional, selfless, trouble-free and a source of constant joy for the mother (Takseva, 2017). These ideologies contradict the present-day research studies which constantly report that mothering can become a burden for mothers (Hasan & Muda, 2021; Ghafni-Lachter, 2021). Meanings attached to motherhood and mothering are continuously being shaped (Ahmadifaraz et al., 2020; Lockwood et al., 2019). In every culture and nation, the concept and ideals for motherhood differ and every culture have a different expectation of attachment and mothering behaviour (Budds, 2021; Bretherton, 1992). For example, Chinese mothers are expected to be highly controlling with relatively low warmth, yet in the culture, it is considered appropriate behaviour, both from the child’s and mother’s perspective. Similar is the case in Pakistan where, children are expected to behave as their parents (Stewart et al., 1999), for which parenting style is adopted to fulfil the societal demand. Mehta and Babel (2020) report that mothers in collectivistic cultures tend to follow either permissive or authoritarian parenting styles.

Literature quotes that mostly mothers perceive themselves in the traditional predefined roles of motherhood but some may develop ambivalence along the way. We have yet to discover that in the present age of life in a pandemic what a mother of an adolescent goes through as there is a new set of challenges.

The purpose of the current study was to assess the lived experiences of mothers of adolescents. The following research questions were explored: What are the experiences of mothers of school-going adolescents? What are the parenting challenges faced by mothers? What strategies are used to deal with parenting challenges by the mothers?

METHODS

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to conduct the study. It is an approach to explore lived experiences without theoretical preconceptions. It is idiographic in nature where each case is studied and analyzed in detail (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Initial themes are generated after transcribing and reviewing each case in detail and with the help of codes clustering of themes is done. The themes are re-analyzed and compared between cases simultaneously. The steps are repeated till superordinate themes are generated. The superordinate themes, master themes and sub-themes collectively show the similarity of lived experience for each case (Alase, 2017).

Participants

Purposive sampling was employed and seven mothers of 11-15 years old school-going adolescents were recruited in the study. The interviews were taken separately with each participant. The age of the mothers was between 30-47 years. All 7 participants were employed. Every participant had more than one child and most of the mothers had teenage boys who were currently in the 11-15 years old age bracket.

Data Collection

The interview guide was prepared and was subjected to expert validation. Five experts reviewed the questions and gave their feedback regarding the questions. Changes were made and some questions were omitted, re-worded and put in sequence. The interviews were conducted with the help of the following guide:

- What sort of problems do mothers of 11-15 years old girls and boys face?
- Have you interacted with other mothers who parent 11-15 years old children?
 - What are their experiences like?
- How do mothers deal with these problems?
 - When a mother starts to look after her children, what problems does she face?
 - What challenges do mothers face when they start to guide their children?

- Is there anything else you want to share?

After the institutional review board's approval, participants were approached, and informed consent was taken for participation in the study. Data were collected through interviews which lasted for approximately 30-40 minutes. Semi-structured open-ended questions were used to collect data. It was a one-time interview only and the interview was audio recorded. Ambiguities were clarified by the interviewer for the interviewee and vice versa. Anonymity was kept and the choice of withdrawal from the study was given to the participants.

Data Analysis

The participants completed a demographic sheet that included questions regarding age, number of children, gender, age and birth order of children. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and assumptions were bracketed before data analysis. This was done to ensure the credibility of the results (Hays & Singh, 2011). The steps for interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) were followed and each interview was analyzed separately. Initial notes and memos were made which helped to generate initial themes. Coding was done simultaneously, after which clustering of the themes was done. The themes were re-analyzed and a final codebook including two superordinate themes, their master themes and sub-themes was developed. The codebook outlined codes from transcribed data for each theme. The data was then validated by participant debriefing. The participants reviewed all the interpretations and provided their feedback that was further incorporated.

RESULTS

Two superordinate themes were generated using interpretative phenomenological analysis, which are apprehensions and parental self-doubt.

Apprehensions

Mothers of adolescents reported countless fears and concerns regarding the adolescent's engagement in immoral acts, for example, one of the mothers' reported fears regarding adolescents developing relations with the opposite gender: *"Are they going after a girl?...if they will go out or if they will go out without telling then..."*. Another mother expressed her concern regarding adolescents' interaction with the opposite gender *"They can text I love you to their boyfriend or girlfriend while sitting amongst the entire family and no one will know."*

Mothers' concerns regarding adolescents' use of addictive substances and befriending misleading friends were indicated by many mothers. One of them said *"Vaping etc. have come, like he says 'there is a new flavour' and I asked how do you know, to which he says 'people were discussing'"*. Another mother stated *"they could sit with wrong people, they could smoke... smoking is the first step, then if you take the first step then addiction can be of anything"*.

While reporting behaviour problems in adolescents, most mothers tended to simultaneously deny the presence of behaviour problems in their adolescent children. *"By the way, this is not in my child but I know normally children lie to their parents"* was stated by one of the mothers, *"Thank God! My children have never bothered me"* was reported by a mother who also quoted *"When I think of something, they would start correcting me do it like this, not like that, so children nowadays are sharp, we were dependent on our parents"*. Another one stated, *"I thank God that my children are not just my children, they are my friends, that's why I have never faced any problem by far"*. She also stated, *"We keep trusting them blindly and we don't know on what path our child is going. Many at times, we do not know whatever is going on"*. Apart from denial, the analysis also showed the presence of ambivalent feelings and perceptions of the mothers towards their adolescent children.

Many mothers quoted statements that depicted helplessness in them especially in regards to internet use and inability to provide a healthy and productive environment; *"We aren't giving the sort of environment to our children the way we should, we cannot give it to them, we are helpless"*, *"Western powers have entered our homes and destroyed our children... they have entered our homes through internet and media, for how long can mothers supervise?"*, *"You can never judge whom your child is talking to. They don't even need to call, they can use other apps"*, and *"Given recent times, we had to give them freedom, we had no other option"*.

Helicopter parenting has also been reported by mothers. Mothers tend to keep a close eye on their adolescent children and control their social interactions. Apart from social interactions the mothers reported having been monitoring and instructing their adolescent regarding personal activities e.g., hygiene, diet etc. *"I open the gate 10 times to check whom he is standing with, what family background"*

does that boy come from, how does he walk, where does he move around; as a boy's mother I do this and every mother should", "I constantly have to repeat myself for this child-like take shower, wash hands".

Parental Self-doubt

Mothers have constantly compared themselves (as a child) with their adolescents by mentioning how they were dependent on their parents and their adolescents are not dependent on them for multiple things. Mothers have also reported being more obedient to their parents as compared to their adolescents: "We needed our mothers for everything, they are very smart, they even start teaching me", "In our times, we used to respond at our parent's first call. Nowadays, parents keep calling and children don't listen".

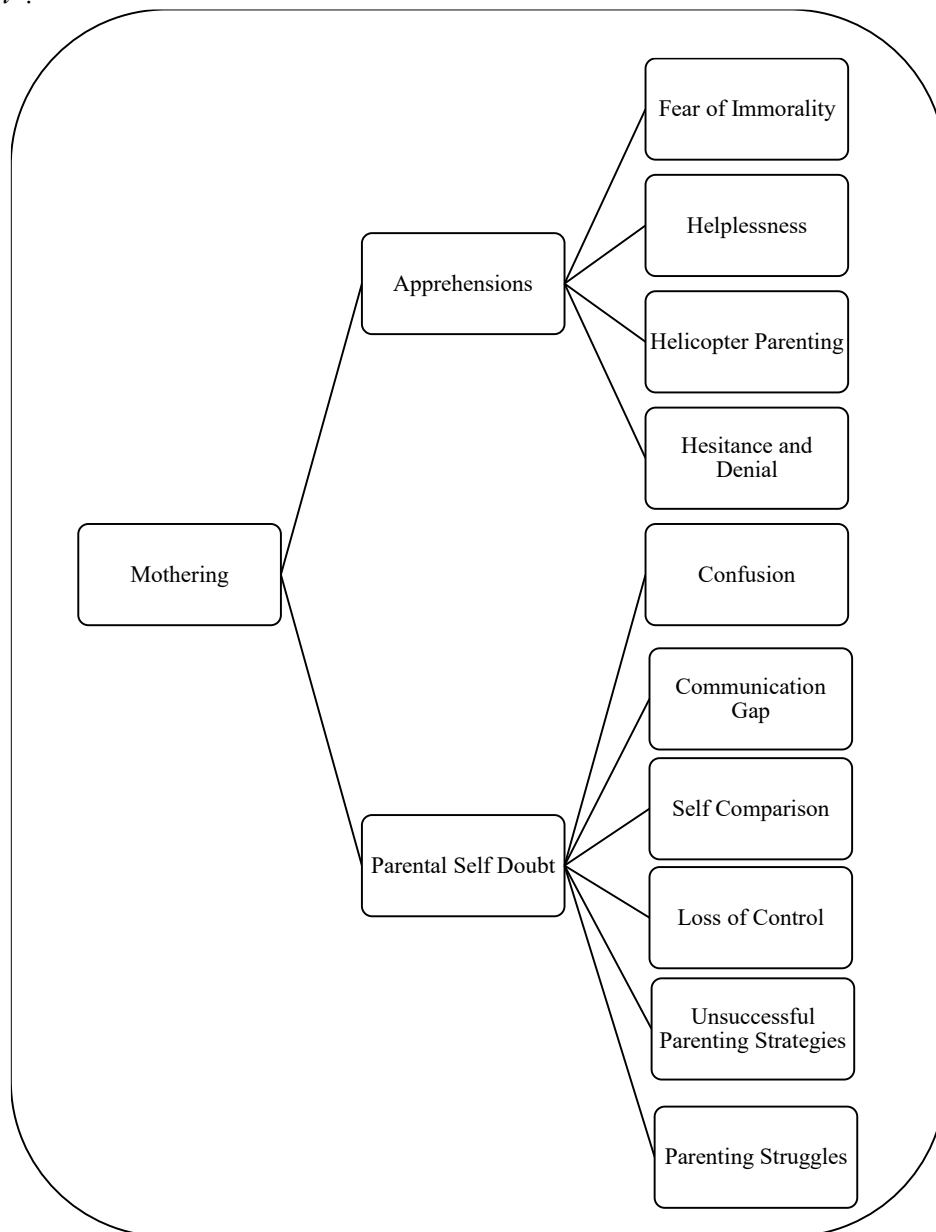


Figure 1. Flow Chart of themes generated

Confusion regarding parenting have been reported by the mothers like when to be strict and when to be lenient, when is imposing restrictions helpful and when not. Interrogating adolescents have also been reported: "We need to give space, need to stop sometimes", "If parents are extremely strict, the child will lie to get their way", "We have introduced the concept of privacy and that is wrong", "Evening functions will not be permitted", "I learned a bit later that I cannot get things done the way I used to before by scolding, not I have to be lenient".

Communication gaps were troublesome for the mothers as they are unable to find words to convey their message to their child or talk to them regarding their concerns: *"We can't explain with such ease", "I am handling a boy ... I cannot tell him openly", "Father is not around", "Five years back...dinner time was supposed to be family time...they get cut off from family"*.

Most mothers have stated experiencing loss of control over their adolescents whether it may be in the form of parental dependence or getting chores done or in monitoring internet use and adolescents' social circle. *"It's a difficult age, when they are young, it's easier", "They are way ahead of us, it's difficult to keep an eye on them", "They don't even ask us... I am surprised"*.

Mothers have shared experiences regarding the struggles of mothering an adolescent. Issues regarding having an opposite-gendered adolescent and hesitation in maternal guidance to providing sexual guidance have been highlighted by mothers: *"I am handling a boy... then there is internet use, as a mother I cannot tell him openly but I guide", "You need to talk to them and build trust so that you will know at least if not 100%, 50% of the source of information is you"*. Troubles of financial pressures and inability in becoming an ideal parent have also indicated parental struggle, *"There are no jobs still we are educating children", "Now even parents don't have time, they stay up late at night"*.

Unsuccessful parenting strategies especially in regards to changing age and stage of child and need for change in parental attitude towards adolescent have been troublesome for mothers as well, *"If they aren't listening to you, don't say it again or they will become stubborn", "I have to deal tactfully... it's a crucial age...if you scold, they will lie more, they will deceive you", "We try to keep check and balance but it is not possible"*.

DISCUSSION

Findings related to mothers' experience in dealing with adolescents include their apprehensions and self-doubt in being a parent. Apprehensions regarding immorality in adolescents including the use of addictive substances, having a poor social circle, and building relations with the opposite gender have been reported. Helplessness and ambivalent feelings along with simultaneous reporting and denying of behaviour problems in one's adolescent are other dimensions of apprehensions in mothers. The second major theme was parental self-doubt in which mothers quoted loss of control over the adolescent, use of parenting strategies that end in vain and constant struggle in finding the appropriate strategy that could work. Interestingly, mothers have compared themselves with their adolescents in regards to behaviour towards parents and obedience towards them.

Mothers expressed fears related to smoking and the use of addictive substances by their adolescents. Andersen et al. (2002) also reported maternal non-accepting attitude towards their adolescent's smoking exists especially when both parents are non-smokers. However, if parents and friends smoke then there is a high chance of the child to indulge in smoking (Vitória et al., 2020), this is consistent with the report of the mothers as they expressed fear related to the adolescent's social circle especially friends who were perceived to be the cause of their adolescent's possible inclination towards smoking and related behaviours. Parents make efforts to prevent smoking behaviour in adolescents using effective communication, punishments, and setting restrictions (Hiemstra et al., 2017). The maternal fear of adolescents' indulgence in smoking or addiction-related behaviours seems global. Apprehensions related to adolescents having relationships with the opposite gender and having immoral friends were also shared by the mothers. Previously it was found that positive parenting practices and pro-social peer relations moderate the relationship between teen dating violence and intimate partner violence (Garrido & Taussig, 2013). However, in Pakistani culture Islam is the widely followed religion (Lall & Vickers, 2009) which prohibits dating (Musso et al., 2002), therefore there is a general unacceptance of dating behaviour by the parents.

Mothers have demonstrated denial and ambivalence towards their adolescents. Mothers are protective of their children as per Bowlby's theory (Bowlby, 1951) and pre-defined cultural ideologies (Ahmadifaraz et al., 2020; Budds, 2021; Silverio et al., 2021), this could be the reason for the expression of denial in regards to the presence of any problems exhibited by the adolescent. On the other hand, a mixture of loving and hating feelings expressed by the mothers for their children also reflect a possible loss of identity for the working mother as she loses her independence and is expected to serve the child unconditionally (Chapman & Gubi, 2019). Mothers in this study were working ladies. Helplessness regarding adolescents' internet use and inability in providing a healthy and positive environment for adolescents' growth has been reported as a point of concern by mothers. This is consistent with previous

findings where mothers have reported feeling helpless regarding adolescents' internet use and maternal monitoring (Talves & Kalmus, 2015).

Helicopter parents are characterized as over-involved parents who provide substantial support (including emotional and physical health advice) to their children even when unwanted. Helicopter parenting was also reported by the mothers in regards to concerns over academic performance and relations with peers. With the excuse of monitoring personal hygiene and media use, mothers' prime concern about helicopter parenting revolved around academic performance and relations with peers. '*Keeping an eye*', ordering to '*stop*', and repeated instructions were part of the parental routine. Studies also show that helicopter parenting revolves around the prime concern of a child's academic achievement/motivation, personal development (Cui et al., 2019; Love et al., 2019). Studies have shown that helicopter parenting is endorsed by mothers (Schiffrin & Liss, 2017).

The second major theme was parental self-doubt which included master themes regarding self-comparison with child, confusion, communication gap, loss of control, parenting struggles and use of unsuccessful parenting strategies.

The most interesting finding of the current study was the mother's self-comparison with her adolescent which can potentially be linked with her ambivalent feelings towards her adolescent. While the literature has focused on mothers' reported stress regarding parenting (Park & Johnston, 2020) and inability in becoming effective parents (Heerman et al., 2017; Yang & Williams, 2021), the self-perception of mothers as dependent and obedient children to her parents and not having the same obedience and dependence from her adolescent has yet to be studied in detail.

In a qualitative study by Talves and Kalmus (2015), it was found that mothers struggle between balancing strictness and leniency as a parenting strategy. Mothers report helplessness and loss of control over the adolescent. However, some mothers reported using monitoring as a parenting tactic, especially during their child's internet use. Interestingly attitudes of mothers towards boys and girls differed. Similar was the case in our study where it was quoted by mothers repeatedly that handling boys are much more difficult for them and that they have to deal differently with a boy. In Pakistan, parents are reportedly harsher towards boys while girls suffer emotional neglect from their parents (Malik, 2010).

Talves and Kalmus (2015) also stated that mothers reported confusion regarding guidance and advice for children. This is consistent with the present study's findings as well where mothers have reported having learned how to deal with an adolescent through repeated failures, however they still seemed unsure on whether the parenting strategies they were using were effective or not. In another qualitative study similar findings were reported (Hajkhodadi et al., 2020), loss of power and control, sense of inadequacy, new situation coping and lack of father's involvement were one of the major themes. In the present study as well, lack of spousal involvement with the adolescents was reported especially about communication with the opposite gendered adolescent as mothers reported unease and found themselves to have lack of words to guide their adolescent.

Mothering an adolescent is difficult (Hajkhodadi et al., 2020) and the mother faces countless struggles and challenges in the maternal role. Apart from financial difficulties; lack of social support, avoidance of help-seeking because of failure in becoming the ideal mother causes distress in the mothers (Vick & DeGroot, 2021; Silverio et al., 2021). Mothers in the present study have reported numerous challenges and struggles they face day to day especially while mothering an adolescent because of unexpected age-related changes in the child.

In short, adolescents being in a difficult age and stage pose a challenge for their mothers who are unprepared for age-related parenting struggles and ways to combat the everyday confrontation with the adolescent. In hopes of achieving culturally, socially and personally defined ideals of motherhood, ineffective parenting strategies are used which lead to a sense of failure and loss of control as a mother. Non-acceptance of ambivalence and denial of the presence of parenting challenges in mothers also leads to confusion on how to mother of adolescents.

Implications

This study highlights how gendered parenting is a practice by mothers in Pakistan. Difficulty and struggle for mothers of adolescents have been highlighted which poses a concern for psychologists and the community in general who are to provide social support and appropriate services to ease the mothering struggle. As the age and stage of the adolescent are difficult for mothers to handle, strategic parenting must be taught to ease day-to-day parenting difficulties faced by mothers. In an attempt to lift the parental self-doubt in mothers, clinicians can also focus on educating the mothers about their

distorted perceptions about the adolescent's behaviours and development of maladaptive parenting as a consequence of distorted maternal perception and attitude.

CONCLUSION

Mothers, who are responsible for their entire family report to be immensely stressed while mothering an adolescent. This leaves them vulnerable and confused especially because of the new set of challenges brought by the pandemic. Mothers in the present age require different strategies for mothering. The ones they come up with have not worked well with adolescents as reported by them. Till now, trial and error has not helped mothers deal with the challenges put forth by their adolescents.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study provides an insight into the lives of mothers of adolescents, the results must be taken into context with their limitations. An expansion of the study is also warranted as the number of participants is low and data was collected from only mothers of adolescents living in an urban city i.e., Lahore, Pakistan. A diverse sample can be targeted for future studies as the results cannot be readily applied to all mothers of adolescents living in the region. Researchers and clinicians can look into other aspects of parenting struggles that have not been covered in the present study. They are also encouraged to examine the mothering ideal for mothers of adolescents and report the journey in reaching that ideal mothering standard.

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