
My Postpartum Depression Consumed Self

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to examine my personal experience of motherhood as it relates to navigating through postpartum depression. Through the methodology of autoethnography, scenarios and encounters were analyzed to depict my marginalized position as a new mother in a traditional Hispanic family and in a contemporary white supremacist hetero-patriarchal society. The theoretical framework of deviance, in particular labeling theory, was used to introduce alternative frameworks to the traditional culture of motherhood. Key themes included cultural values seen as gendered scripts that dictate the place of women within the motherhood realm. Discussion of what the dominant culture deems normal is utilized to demonstrate the conflicts that an individual may experience when internalizing stigma around resisting the traditional roles of womanhood. Marginalization and implicit acts of othering, condoned by those perpetuating hetero-patriarchal values exhibiting normalized ideals, exacerbate the subordination of those who do not fit in this idealized matrix of motherhood.

INTRODUCTION

Motherhood is a very challenging experience to navigate. If you fail, your child will be a direct reflection of that failure. There are cultural expectations for how a child should be brought up, how one should present themselves as a mother, how a mother has a 'natural' ability to nurture. What is not spoken about, is the possibility that a woman can have a child and not be equipped with unrealistic characteristics. Postpartum depression can suck the life out of a new mother. With little information being circulated about the condition, it can make one feel extremely isolated. Developing postpartum depression is something deemed deviant to the social world. It marginalizes a new mom, progressing to the sense of othering. My experience with postpartum depression was a life

changing experience. However, rallying the strength to recover was one of the best things I have experienced in life.

After her birth, I lacked a natural bond with my daughter - a bond I was told would come naturally. It was very confusing to me as a new mom. I knew this stemmed from my lack of ability to breastfeed her, but I was internally conflicted. I felt robbed of the experience everyone raves about when they bring a new baby home. I let my husband and parents take charge of her caregiving because I felt that I had already failed her. I could not provide my daughter with the one thing she needed to thrive, something my body was supposed to do naturally. How could I succeed at anything else? I didn't realize I was experiencing postpartum depression until my daughter was nearly six months old. That was a very challenging time for me. I wasn't so much in denial, but it wasn't something I was ready to open up and talk about. I come from a fairly traditional Mexican family. Postpartum depression is taboo and implies that you are not meant to be a mother. My family believes that once you become a mom, you put all your emotions aside and pride yourself on raising your child the best that you can. How could I fulfill these expectations when I could not even identify a connection between us?

When I finally came forward to my husband about how I was feeling, we cried together. I knew that was the first step to my mental and emotional healing. We were ready to venture through this journey together side by side. That is what gave me the strength to push through. I became more involved and present with my daughter. I was balancing school and parenting much more efficiently. My mom noticed a shift in my behavior and sat me down to discuss her previous concerns. I was confronted by a mirror I could no longer evade. This is when the term that I avoided for so long surfaced – postpartum depression. It felt like a bomb exploded within me. My mom is a mental health facilitator and MATT coordinator for the Department of Child and Family Services. She knew exactly what she was talking about. I thought I was prepared for all the questions she would ask me. I wasn't prepared when she asked if I had ever considered harming my child. As someone with long term experience, looking back now, I don't feel like I reacted properly. I stormed out of my mom's house and sped home where I had a two-hour breakdown waiting

for my husband to get home. How could my own mother ask me that? How could she think I was capable of committing such a monstrous act? My mother has seen a lot of ugly in this world, and she had to do what she felt necessary to protect the grandchild she had been helping raise for half of a year. To society, I was a threat to my daughter, a failed parent, and a disgraced mother.

Gendered scripts tell us that I was supposed to be a ‘natural’ nurturer. I was supposed to be able to feed my child with my own production of milk. I was supposed to put her first the minute she came out of me. Eventually I realized that all of expectations were reflections of the patriarchal society we live in, not a reflection of who I was or who I wanted to be. I was an unfortunate individual who had to take a step back, analyze the situation, and implement changes.

I rarely speak about my journey, but there was one specific instance where I decided to educate my sister on the subject. This led to her frowning upon me and making the statement, “I never felt that way with any of my kids. Some people are just not meant to be parents. I could never imagine hurting my children”. It took everything in me not to blow up, as anyone would naturally do. Instead, I took the high road and relayed that I never once thought about hurting Nalani, my daughter, and walked away from the situation. Mom-shaming comes and goes, I use those instances as fuel to be positive. I refuse to allow the opinions of others and what they deem normal be utilized as a tool to marginalize others. Everyone’s experiences of parenthood are vastly different, what one experiences may not be the case for other families.

There are many misconceptions postpartum depression. Every woman experiences it differently. The lack of awareness allows for false information to spread. One thing I had to overcome was the ideology that I wore the postpartum depression, that it was performative. My struggle with postpartum depression is ongoing, my daughter is almost two and there are some days that are definitely harder than others. I have accepted that my normal differs from the norms of society and the dominant culture. There is always a power struggle when conversing with other moms. There’s constant criticism about how I navigate through motherhood. To say that it does not affect me would be untrue. I

have had to reframe my whole ideology of parenting. I conceptualized ideals that I felt would benefit my daughter and me - a new set of expectations I set for myself, to aid me in my adventure of raising my child. I believe parenting is a process where trial and error is progressive. I have allowed myself to become ambivalent when others force their own beliefs upon me. I am my own critic, and it pains me to admit that it took quite a while before I comprehended that my experience would not be similar to those I've witnessed.

Patriarchy determines that as a woman, we are subordinate and being a mother is my entire purpose of life. Lacking the 'natural' instinct and creating my own system of parenting threatens the norms already in place. Adapting to my situation and creating my own expectations jeopardizes the preexisting scripts we are expected to act out in the social world. I am an example of how acceptable it is to target those who threaten societal norms. Society can be cruel, if 'normal' people think you are a threat, they shame you to the best of their ability. They make you feel subordinate in attempts to sway you to become adherent. There is a gender hierarchy in place. If women change the system, imagine what power they could hold. Changes in society should be welcomed. Unfortunately, the act of "othering" triumphs over open-mindedness.

I could never assimilate properly into society due to 'normal' people othering me. A 'normal' person rejects the idea of my conformity because they fail to relate to my experience. When a 'normal' person hears my story, they become overwhelmed. It makes them feel sad, which is followed by ignorance, because there's a barrier of understanding. Their discomfort is a result of my rejection to conformity. I am different from them, which ultimately leads to my being labeled an outcast. They themselves have not felt what I feel, and they do not understand how severe a situation can become. The 'normal' people view my postpartum depression as an excuse for not wanting to face my own inadequacies of being a parent. Not asking for help reflects my negligence, and reiterates the negative stigma held against me. How could I step forward and speak about something, knowing what the outcome would be? They could not conceive how the birth of my daughter, something that should be celebrated, had the

ability to make me feel inferior and sad. A ‘normal’ person shames me because they could not understand how a mother could feel that way.

Oftentimes, normal people utilize the act of othering to tackle my endeavors of maneuvering through parenthood. There have been occurrences where this method was prosperous, but I look at it now as character-building. I needed those negative occasions to help myself become stronger willed, for both my daughter and me. Now, when someone challenges my experiences with postpartum depression and parenting, I provide the individual with insight. I share my experience with them. What they choose to do after that is their prerogative. I have found this route to be more impactful - when I show any sign of fear or sadness, I give them power over me. I have learned how not to allow others to get the best of me when addressing one of my biggest vulnerabilities. Their attempts to berate me will not have the intended effect. Instead, it made me a much stronger woman, and a better mother.

As a sociologist in training, I was fortunate enough to determine that the looking glass self was destructive to me. As I mentioned before, one of the biggest struggles was shifting the notion that I performed postpartum depression. There was a point where I thought everyone in public knew I was struggling just by looking at me. I became a reflection of what I knew everyone thought of me. I needed to abandon this idea and adopt a new sense of self. I wanted to highlight my distinctions from others, I wanted to praise my authenticity. Having felt like my experience with postpartum depression was a personal fable, it became crucial to develop a deeper understanding that it can happen to any woman. I was not exempt from any potentialities that are associated with childbirth, and I needed to remember that. When I finally understood that my experience with postpartum depression didn’t define me, my sense of self-identity became much more positive. I realized my negative experience could be helpful to someone else one day, and that I needed to come to terms with it. I could not let the depression consume me any longer, I needed to act, and I needed to do it fast. I learned that it could get better. Only I could decide what type of relationship I wanted with my daughter. I

learned that I must allow love to overtake the bad, and I learned to love my very dysfunctional motherhood experience.

The theory of deviance that best describes my encounter with postpartum depression is Labeling Theory. Cox (2018:122) pointed out that:

Labeling theory also includes analysis of the processes of the labeling, or the stereotyping (Schur 1971) that is involved. Stigmas are powerful because of this process of typification, which refers to the stereotypical terms under which culture has created a standardized and simplified category to describe all bearers of the deviance. Indeed, the stereotypes often extend beyond the attribute and constitute a master-status. (Huges 1945)

Labeling theory is demonstrated in my experience because I subconsciously began to absorb the criticisms I was receiving. I internalized the negative labels. The views people had of me began to mold my self-identity. I was becoming all of the negative things those ‘normal’ people saw in me. Although I was informally labeled, being labeled as deviant took a dramatic toll on my self-esteem. It wasn’t until I had my epiphany that I realized if I was already considered deviant, what would I be considered if I created my own terms of motherhood? That is precisely why labeling theory best fits my situation. Oftentimes, when individuals are defined or labeled as deviant, it creates an inclination to become more deviant in society because you are already a victim of stigma. When I decided that I was going to challenge the unrealistic expectations of motherhood, it was because I was already negatively viewed and stigmatized. I thought to myself, how much worse can it get?

As a survivor of postpartum depression, I feel it necessary to state: life goes on, and there is a light at the end of the tunnel. Moving away from the darkness takes time and patience. Change does not occur overnight. Trauma is an ongoing process that you learn to cope with for the rest of your life. Having setbacks should be expected, do not allow them to discourage you. Keep pushing and remind yourself that you are your child’s role model. Create the ultimate parent in your mind and apply those attributes through

actions you take. Being negatively labeled, although hurtful, will break you only if you allow it. Use the negativity to push forward to be the best parent to your child. Love your child and educate them. Change can happen over time if enough people want it to.

My deviating behavior in its entirety, was experienced as having to guide myself along a route foreign to me. Overcoming my Postpartum, although a prosperous conquest to me, was seen as an unfavorable act to normal people. Having felt negatively at all during my time in new motherhood, I was constantly reminded about my disappointment as a parent. Normal people intended to break me for being different, I allowed them to for quite some time. I was unintentionally oppressing myself in the midst of self-victimization. Their attempts to other me, ended the minute I reframed parenting for myself. My sense of self was being altered to cater to what I felt was positive. I am thankful for my journey, the good and the bad. It has made me who I am today.

REFERENCES

- Cox, Peta. 2013. "The Stigma of Deviant Physical Appearance" pp. 120-127 in *Deviance: Understanding Societal Norms and Stigmas*. Edited by Luis Nuño San Diego, CA: Cognella Publishers, 2018.