Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.
"The Madonna Myth" - the ideology of motherhood and it's influence on women with Postnatal Depression

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Social Work

at Massey University, Turitea, Palmerston North, New Zealand

Kim Jacqueline Fry
2001
ABSTRACT

This thesis explores whether societal myths surrounding motherhood can contribute to the development of Postnatal Depression (PND) for some women. It considers the social construction of motherhood and the transmission of powerful messages to women, both before and during motherhood. It examines what happens when the reality of motherhood does not meet the idealise images of motherhood.

The research involved face to face interviews with six women who had experienced PND. The key findings were that there are two strong myths surrounding motherhood. Mothers and non-mothers keep these alive in society. The myths are firstly, that motherhood is a natural stage for women in heterosexual relationships and that therefore the act of mothering is instinctual. The second myth is that motherhood brings with it fulfilment and happiness for the individual woman. The research found that the reality of motherhood also contains losses of identity and feelings of guilt and failure. These feelings are compounded for women with PND.

The findings give rise to recommendations including increasing education and information about PND for pregnant women, increasing support services for new mothers more open and honest discussion in society about the realities of motherhood and the need to value mothers and their contribution to society.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks firstly go to the six women who shared with me their experiences and thoughts around motherhood and Postnatal Depression. Their stories provided rich and powerful information for my thesis.

I wish to acknowledge the Post and Ante-Natal Distress Support Group (Wellington) Inc. for their assistance in recruiting participants for the research in this thesis.

I would also like to thank my supervisors Wendy Parker, Gwen Ellis and Mervyl McPherson for their wisdom and guidance throughout this process.

I also acknowledge the financial assistance of the Massey University Social Policy and Social Work Graduate Research Fund, who assisted me with a grant.

Last, but not least, I would like to thank my partner, my family, friends, work colleagues and my manager for their support and encouragement.

This thesis has obtained approval from the Massey University Human Ethics committee.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## ABSTRACT II

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS III

## TABLE OF CONTENTS IV

### CHAPTER ONE - THE MADONNA MYTH 1
  - INTRODUCTION 1
  - MY PERSPECTIVE 1
  - AIM OF THE THESIS 2
  - MY RESEARCH 3
  - STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS 3
  - CONCLUSION 6

### CHAPTER TWO - "IT WAS JUST LIKE A HORRIBLE DARK CLOUD CAME OVER ME" 7
  - INTRODUCTION 7
  - WOMEN AND MENTAL HEALTH 8
  - POSTNATAL DISTRESS 10
  - PND - A NORMAL REACTION TO MOTHERHOOD? 12
  - DETECTION 13
    - Problems with Detection 13
    - The Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS) 15
  - CAUSES OF PND 16
    - Biological Theories 17
    - Psychological Theories 18
    - Social Theories 19
  - TREATMENT 24
  - CONCLUSION 27

### CHAPTER THREE - THE GLORIFICATION OF MOTHERHOOD 28
  - INTRODUCTION 28
  - THE MEANING OF MYTHS 29
    - 'IT'S ONLY NATURAL' 30
      - Biology is destiny 30
      - Motherhood equals Adulthood 32
      - Deviance 34
    - 'A GOOD MOTHER ALWAYS' 36
      - Preparation 36
      - The ideal family 38
      - The experts 40
      - The two Madonna myths 43
        - 1. Maternal Instinct 44
        - 2. Happiness and love 45
    - THE ADVENTURES OF SUPERMUM' 46
      - Guilt 46
      - Working mums 49
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Loss of identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION: THE AIR THAT WE BREATHE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER FOUR - METHODOLOGY 57

### INTRODUCTION 57

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY 57
- Feminist Research 57
- Qualitative Research 60

### RESEARCH DESIGN 61
- Reviewing the Literature 61
- Ethical Issues 62
  - Informed Consent 62
  - Confidentiality 63
  - Minimising harm 63
  - Truthfulness 64
  - Social sensitivity 64
- Design of questions 65
- Accessing potential participants 67
- Recruitment of participants 68
- Participant Demographics 70
- Pilot interview 70
- Observations of the interviews 71

### DATA ANALYSIS 74
- Transcribing 74
- Coding 75

### CONCLUSION 76

## CHAPTER FIVE - FAIRYTALES AND FANTASIES 78

### INTRODUCTION 78

### CHILDHOOD IMAGES 79

### BECOMING A MOTHER 83

### PREGNANCY 86

### EXPERIENCES OF MOTHERHOOD 91
- Positive experiences 91
- Instinctual and natural motherhood 91
- Lack of control 93
- Identity changes 94
- Returning to work 95
- Support 97
- Feelings of failure 99

### CONCLUSION 100

## CHAPTER SIX - REALITY AND RECOVERY 102

### INTRODUCTION 102

### POSTNATAL DEPRESSION 103
- Finding out 103
- Stigma 105
- Information 109
- Treatment 109

### THOUGHTS FOR THE FUTURE 112