ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Mothering Ideology: A Qualitative Exploration of Mothers' Perceptions of Navigating Motherhood Pressures and Partner Relationships

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Abstract

Good mother ideology refers to beliefs that women are only 'good' mothers if they adhere to the tenets of dominant parenting discourse, such as intensive mothering ideology, which prioritizes children's needs and child-raising above all else. Undergirded by this ideology, mothers' attempts to navigate the transition to motherhood are fraught with pressures, and the transition is associated with negative health outcomes for mothers and children; yet existing research gives little attention to the quality or dynamics of the partner relationship as part of this transition. The current study examined motherhood pressure and the impact on partner relationships through individual, semi-structured interviews with 19 mothers living in Australia who were 18 years or older in a heterosexual relationship with at least one child under the age of five. Thematic analysis revealed four key themes: discourses on motherhood: criticisms of mothers and internalised guilt; transformation of identity; entrenchment of gender roles through childrearing; and positive relationship dynamics: supportive fathers and challenging gender roles. This study contributes to the larger body of literature highlighting the complexity of dominant mothering ideology and its entanglement with and impact on partner relationships. Further, this study includes mothers' perceptions of how they navigate these pressures within the relationship with their partner and the family unit. These findings have implications for programs to support mothers and other caregivers, as well as challenge unrealistic standards for motherhood.

Keywords good mother ideology · relationship satisfaction · relationship dynamics · heterosexual partners · family · motherhood · mothers · gender roles · child-rearing practices · thematic analysis

The transition to motherhood brings challenges as mothers adjust to the physical, psychological, and social changes that influence them, their relationships, and their families (Levesque et al., 2020). In particular, pressure may arise from the good mother ideology, a set of social beliefs outlining the expectations for mothers and how they should parent and raise their children should they wish to be perceived as a 'good mother' (Zhou, 2017), which includes devoting their entire physical and mental self to their children at the expense of everything else, also known as intensive mothering ideology (Hays, 1998), and being not only the perfect mother, but also exceptional in any career pursuits (Choi et al., 2005). Subscribing to good mother ideology is associated with higher levels of stress (Wall, 2010), anxiety (Henderson et al., 2016), lower parental self-efficacy (Henderson et al., 2016), depressive symptoms (Rizzo et al., 2013), parental burnout (Meeussen & Van-Laar, 2018), and lower life satisfaction (Rizzo et al., 2013). It is well documented that mothers' mental health plays an integral part in an child's overall health and development (e.g., Leis et al., 2014). Hence, understanding other potential consequences and sequalae of good mother ideology for mothers and the family unit is necessary.

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Good Mother Ideology

Good mother ideology is bore from dominant motherhood and parenting discourses across history, religions, and cultures (e.g., Arendell, 2000; Chodorow, 1998; Thurer, 1994). The modern conceptualisation of a good mother typically characterizes mothering as instinctive and women as having an inherent capacity and desire for nurturance and child-rearing (Hall, 1998). Intensive mothering ideology further characterizes parenting as a child-focused, emotionally taxing, labour intensive, time-consuming task best completed by women as they are the 'expert' caregivers (Hays, 1998). Accordingly, a child's needs should be placed above the mother's and, given the extensive caregiving requirements, there should be limited opportunity for mothers to engage in activities outside of child-rearing, suggesting a mother's needs should be completely fulfilled by their child (Hays, 1998).

The idea that women should be "naturally equipped and always ready and available to care for their children, no matter what the circumstances" (Krane & Davies, 2007 pp. 28) creates an unrealistic and unattainable pressure for modern women who are often working, studying, and/or holding a myriad of other roles in their community and family alongside being a mother (Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010). Modern connotations of Intensive mothering often describe a 'supermom,' that is, one who can easily juggle these competing needs, and thus further highlights the pressures mothers face even if they were to 'escape' the idea that they should be chained to their motherhood (Choi et al., 2005). The standards to which mothers should aspire are maintained through popular culture, the media, and social media, thus being difficult to escape (Abetz & Moore, 2018; Chae, 2015), and eliciting competition between mothers to portray their 'good' motherhood to others via social media (Chae, 2015).

Good mother ideology provides a set of prescriptive dichotomous standards to which all mothers are held and can measure themselves and other mothers against, suggesting mothers are 'good' if their behaviours and beliefs align with the tenets of dominant mothering discourse, or 'bad' if they do not (Lanctot & Turcotte, 2017; Pedersen, 2016). When mothers achieve these standards, it is often met with praise and positive feedback from others, further reinforcing good mother ideology and the importance of motherhood as part of a woman's identity (Turner & Norwood, 2013). However, if mothers do not adhere to these standards, they are met with judgement, negative evaluation, exclusion, and mum-shaming (C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, 2017; Orton-Johnson, 2017). Mum-shaming refers to when a mother is criticised for their parenting choices. Abetz and Moore (2018) analysed mothers' experiences described in online blogs and found mothers were commonly shamed for their choices in feeding, bathing, and sleeping. Research suggests mum-shaming is becoming increasingly prevalent with 61% of mothers reporting these experiences (C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, 2017). In response to this shaming, it has been suggested that parents, particularly young and first-time mothers, strive to portray themselves as perfect parents on social media (Abetz & Moore, 2018).

Relationship Dynamics

In addition to the societal pressures to display and enact 'good motherhood,' mothers must adapt to changing family dynamics. Becoming a new parent is a challenging transition, with reduced quality partner time, changes in identity, and a re-organisation of the family unit (Albanese et al., 2018; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020; Van-Scheppingen et al., 2018). Despite shifting gender norms and women entering the workforce, women continue to manage most household labour, a pattern that continues as women become mothers (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Horne et al., 2017). Ciciolla and Luthar (2019) found several factors in the division of household labour leading to decreased satisfaction in the relationship with their partner/father of their child, including parenting tasks, financial decisions, and intimacy. Specifically, when mothers' felt solely responsible for parenting tasks or were primarily responsible for all household finances it was associated with decreased relationship satisfaction.

Complicating this shift in relationship dynamics, women must also contend with a shift in personal identity when they become mothers (Hennekam, 2016; Laney et al., 2015), particularly as they try to navigate the pressure of 'good' motherhood. Motherhood is a demanding long-term role and one characterised by having someone almost completely dependent on you (Laney et al., 2015). As these changes occur, mothers experience a temporary loss of their sense of self, which may include their self as a partner, due to the level and urgency of newborns needs, which are often placed above their own and their partner's needs (Laney et al., 2014). Further complicating this transformation of mothers' identity is the juxtaposition between women's ideals of motherhood and the reality of becoming a mother (Laney et al., 2015). This juxtaposition is often associated with shame and guilt, which negatively impacts a mother's sense of competence in her parenting ability and acceptance of their new identity (Choi et al., 2005). Women's identity as a partner also changes when they become a mother, as they navigate the potentially competing needs of their children versus their relationship.

While most studies on good mother ideology have focused on the repercussions for the health and wellbeing of mothers and children (Gunderson & Barrett, 2017), or the impact on parent's mental health (Meeussen & Van-Laar, 2018; Ruppanner et al., 2019), the influence of the pressures mothers face on the relationship with their partner and father of their children (regardless of whether they are married, engaged, or simply living together) has been largely understudied. Fundamental questions remain regarding how mothers navigate the pressure to be a good mother, identity changes, and their relationship with their partner. By understanding good mother ideology and the transition to motherhood may insert pressure on the relationship with partners (particularly how mothers negotiate parenting tasks and juggle their identity as an individual, mother, and partner), we will gain a better understanding of the broader consequences of good mother ideology and how critical family relationships may be impacted by these pressures and discourses.

The Current Study

The current study aimed to generate rich qualitative data from women who are mothers describing their experiences of their partner relationships, in order to understand how women navigate the impact of good mother ideology, and their shifting identities as mother and partner. The research questions of interest were: (1) How does good mother ideology factor into mothers' description of and satisfaction of the relationship with their partner/father of their children? (2) How does good mother ideology influence mothers' identity as a partner? (3) How does good mother ideology relate to mothers' negotiating of their partners' involvement in child-rearing?

Method

Participants

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 19 mothers. Participants were eligible if they lived in Australia, were able to read and understand English, were over the age of 18 years, had at least one child under the age of five years, and were in a heterosexual relationship, and did not personally know the researchers. Participants' relationship status included married, engaged, or defacto (relationship between two people living together on a genuine domestic basis for 12 months or longer). For consistency, the term partner will be used to describe these three relationship statuses. Given differences in gender role attitudes between heterosexual and same-sex relationships (Pollitt et al., 2018; Shechory &

Ziv, 2007), this study focuses on heterosexual relationships. Further, caregiving needs are highest between birth and five years (Rizzo et al., 2013; Smyth & Craig, 2017), hence women with children in this age range were chosen. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 40 years (M_{age} = 33.73 years, SD = 4.37 years). There were no participants in this study with multiple births or stepchildren. Most participants had one or two children, though one participant had 4 children, and one had 6 children. A detailed table of demographic information is contained in Table 1.

The number of participants required for a qualitative study vary from 5 to 50 participants depending on the methodology used, quality of the data, scope of the study, amount of information gained from each participant, and the researcher's experience (Dworkin, 2012). As proposed by Braun & Clarke (2013), to determine the sample size, inductive thematic analysis was used and recruitment ended when repeated references to key themes and an absence of newly emerging themes was determined, as described below.

Interview Schedule

Semi-structured interviews were deemed appropriate for this study as they offer consistency between interviews yet allow flexibility for participants to respond and share their experiences and the opportunity for the interviewer to ask clarifying questions for context (Braun & Clarke, 2013). To determine the interview protocol, previous literature on good mother ideology was considered, and eight open-ended questions were developed to elicit narratives on themes including good mother ideology, partner relationship, and child-rearing. The questions focused on the pressures participants felt to be a good mother, how their relationship changed since having children, and how they negotiate parenting tasks (See Supplement A in the online supplement for the interview schedule).

Procedure

Following institutional ethics review board approval from Federation University Research Ethics Committee, advertisements were placed on Facebook, and snowball sampling was encouraged. After clicking the link, participants were directed to a Qualtrics survey where they were presented with a plain language information statement and an opportunity to leave their name, contact details and availability for an interview. Participants were contacted to confirm their eligibility, organise a time to conduct the interview and were provided with a consent form to be returned before the commencement of the interview. All interviews were conducted by TW. Participants were advised of TW's interest in the area which was based on broad clinical observations

Table 1 Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Age	Employment status	Relationship status	Relationship length	Number of children	Country of Birth	Religious affiliation	Annual household income (AUD)
Anna	31	Employed	Married	6 years	1	Australia	Agnostic	$100,000
Beth	27	Not employed	Married	4.5 years	1	England	Pentecostal Christian	$46,000
Catherine	26	Employed	Engaged	10 years	1	Australia	No religious affiliation	$120,000
Delia	32	Employed	Married	5 years	1	Scotland	No religious affiliation	$220,000
Ella	36	Employed	Defacto	3 years	2	New Zealand	No religious affiliation	$200,000
Faith	35	Employed	Married	5 years	1	Australia	Atheist	$95,000
Georgina	37	Employed	Married	9 years	2	Australia	Catholic	$260,000
Holly	40	Employed	Married	16 years	2	Scotland	No religious affiliation	$160,000
Isabelle	38	Employed	Defacto	5 years	1	Australia	Christian	$160,000
Jennifer	25	Employed	Defacto	1 year	1	Australia	Atheist	$30,000
Kristy	33	Not employed	Married	15 years	2	Australia	No religious affiliation	$230,000
Louise	40	Employed	Married	5 years	2	Australia	No religious affiliation	$150,000
Marie	33	Not employed	Married	10 years	2	Australia	No religious affiliation	$110,000
Natalie	35	Employed	Married	18 years	1	Australia	No religious affiliation	$180,000
Olivia	37	Employed	Defacto	12 years	2	Australia	Atheist	$250,000
Phoebe	34	Employed	Married	8 years	6	Australia	Catholic	$180,000
Quin	32	Employed	Defacto	11 years	2	Macedonia	Orthodox Christian	$140,000
Rebecca	38	Employed	Defacto	8 years	4	Australia	No religious affiliation	$170,000
Shannon	32	Employed	Engaged	15 years	2	Australia	Catholic	$120,000

Note. The average household weekly income in Australia is $2,086 (AUD; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

during their clinical practice. To put the participants at ease and encourage open discourse, TW ensured participants had a confidential space, drew upon micro-counselling skills and techniques learnt throughout their post-graduate study in psychology and developed during their time practising as a general psychologist. However, TW remained cognisant of her role in the study as a researcher rather than a therapist and clarified with participants that it was a research interview. Due to COVID-19 social distancing restrictions, interviews, which lasted approximately 30 min, were conducted online, and recorded using Microsoft Teams. Basic demographic information was collected prior to the main interview schedule. All questions were presented to each interviewee and if further information was required, prompts were provided. At the conclusion of the interview, participants were offered the opportunity to raise any concerns and were also emailed a debriefing statement with additional supports in the unlikely event participants experienced distress. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by the TW and were cross-checked for accuracy by DW. All participants were assigned a pseudonym to protect participant anonymity.

Data Analysis

A critical-realist framework (Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021) was implemented for analysis as it acknowledges participants' experiences to be real and true for them, while acknowledging the intersection of cultural context and different aspects of participants' experience. Further, an inductive approach is in keeping with the exploratory focus of this project, which seeks to understand good mother ideology and the relationship from participants' perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This data-driven approach was chosen as it allowed the analysis to be guided by the identification of themes within and across interview transcripts, rather than trying to fit the data into existing good mother ideology models and a researcher's preconceptions about the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).

To this end, the transcripts were checked against taped interviews for accuracy. To become familiar with the data, the transcripts were read by TW and DW independently to gain a better understanding of the narratives. Next, a line-by-line analysis was conducted according to the recommendations of Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2021). Open coding was completed for each transcript by hand using Microsoft office programs, therefore no coding software was required. Once each transcript was annotated, nascent experiential themes, given a brief code, were listed in a master list and the coder would move on to the next transcript, checking whether the experiences and feelings (i.e., codes) identified by the previous transcript(s) were true for this transcript, and noting any new or different nascent themes. This process was then repeated until all transcripts were coded. As no new themes emerged by 19 transcripts, further interviews ceased to be scheduled. The master list of codes was examined closely

to form over-arching themes, which were then reviewed, defined, and named. This process was repeated independently by DW, and collaborative discussions occurred to finalise themes. Where there were discrepancies, these were resolved through independently reviewing data followed by discussion.

Since we are aware that the experiences of women with one, two, or multiple children is likely to differ substantially, we examined whether the inclusion of the two participants with more than two children had any undue influence on the determination of themes. Removing these two participants and any subthemes encoded in the master list had no overall impact on the description or interpretation of themes. These two participants transcripts did not contain any major points of difference from the remaining 17 transcripts. To maintain authenticity in our descriptions of these women's experiences, we chose to retain them, but see the Discussion section for a comment on future research directions.

Researcher Reflexivity

All researchers in this project identify as women. TW completed this project as part of her clinical psychology masters' degree. She is currently registered as a psychologist and working in Australia, and the questions for this project were broadly derived from her experience in clinical practice. DW is an emerging researcher in women's psychology, with a focus on interpersonal dynamics, the transition to motherhood, and women's roles. We acknowledge these experiences and perspectives shape our interpretation of the interviews and advise these are just one interpretation of the words contained therein. Both the student (TW) and supervisor (DW) reflected on ways in which motherhood is conceptualised, both theoretically and practically, and acknowledge the roles these experiences and understandings have in shaping the emergent themes as they undertook the thematic analysis. NS is an Australian sociological researcher with an understanding of how web-based technologies influence our social world. JG is an experienced qualitative psychological researcher working in the UK with a focus on family functioning and mental health. Both NS and JG provided support and feedback on the presentation of themes, the contextualisation of the findings in the broader literature, and on the shaping of the manuscript.

Results

We present the results of the thematic analysis below. Four key themes were identified that reflect the nature of good mother ideology as experienced by the participants and their description of its influence on their relationship and parenting. Table 2 provides a summary of these themes.

Discourses on Motherhood: Criticisms of Mothers and Internalised Guilt

Participants' narratives continually and consistently indicated an awareness of good mother ideology. Some women were consciously aware of the expectations on mothers, as Natalie says, "there seems to be this societal perception that good mothers should be martyrs, that they should just sacrifice everything for their children." Others appeared to have a more internalised perspective on the intensive mothering ideology, as Phoebe indicated "It's just that being a mom is a very, you can't I guess, see, the fruits of your labor… it's kind of one of those things where you're constantly giving and giving and giving of yourself, but you don't really get that much back." Some women were able to articulate how intensive mothering ideology conflicts with the supermom ideal:

> It's really been drilled into me on that side of the family that it's really important to be a great wife and be a great mother and be a great housekeeper. And since I was little, [my mother] would talk about when you have kids, it's important to do this and that and the other. But then at the same time, my dad has always really drilled into me, it's really important that you get a good job, and you make good money. So, I feel like I've always had both in mind or expected, I guess, from a family point of view, that you need to somehow be an amazing careerwoman, but also an amazing parent. And it's just trying to figure out how to integrate both of them without necessarily driving myself into complete exhaustion. (Catherine)

When participants internalised these interactions and judgements, it was difficult to develop their identity as a competent parent, and this often led to a sense of guilt:

> And then sometimes is that bit of guilt, like when I was studying, and my son was in daycare or I wasn't spending as much time with him because I was so focused on getting through the year and things like that. That um you feel a bit guilty that you weren't doing what you felt might have been in the best interest. (Kristy)

Around half of the participants expressed a dichotomous view of motherhood in which mothers are represented as either good or bad, depending on whether they meet the expectations of motherhood, thus expressing the good

Table 2 Summary of Themes

Theme	Description	Example quote
Discourses on motherhood: criticisms of mothers and internalised guilt	Mothers were exposed to and often internalised dominant mothering discourses such as the good mother ideology and upheld these expectations through fear of judgement and altering their beliefs or behaviours when in public. Fathers are not held to the same unattainable standards and are often unaware of the pressure's mothers face.	I felt like I couldn't get it right and that I was going to keep stuffing up and people were going to keep finding every single thing that I couldn't do perfectly and tell me about it and exploit and shove it in my face and say you didn't do enough, you haven't done enough here. So the pressure is massive. It's insurmountable, really. (Erin)
Transformation of identity	Change in identity in areas of sexuality, occupation, and individuality. This transition was sometimes characterised by loss and confusion as mothers attempted to integrate contradictory identities, and was easier for those who maintained other identities. The integration of identities was perceived as easier for fathers.	You're trying to kind of establish yourself as an individual, as a person. And then you're also trying to be a partner and you're also trying to be a mother and they're actually competing, if that makes sense, they're not complimentary. (Phoebe)
Entrenchment of Gender Roles through Childrearing	Childrearing often reinforces traditional gender roles in finances, household labour and childrearing. This reinforces the intensive mothering ideology of mother as expert. Some tasks are biologically linked (breastfeeding). Division of labour may be a source of tension or allow mothers power via choice over childrearing.	The kids are mostly also raised with me because [husband] works long hours so they are mostly raised with me then he sees them at night… Definitely one person will have to make a compromise. It will probably have to be [husband]. Because I feel that the parent that looks after the kids more so needs to have more of a say as to what happens. (Quin)
Positive relationship dynamics, supportive fathers, and challenging traditional gender roles	A higher degree of fathers emotional support, having shared goals, open communication and awareness of good mother ideology, including challenging this and subverting gender norms was linked with more positive relationship dynamics, and maternal gate-opening behaviours including father being involved in child-rearing decisions.	I feel like he's putting things into perspective for me a bit more. So even though I'm still have those expectations really high. I don't obsess over them so much when I can bounce things off him. We're good at balancing. (Louise)

mother ideology. As Beth says, "I had the issue that when we'd go out in public, I was really anxious of how people would perceive our interactions with [child]. Particularly whether they would think I was a good mom or not." This dichotomous view of motherhood was expressed through guilt when not able to live up to the expectations of the good mother. For example,

> I used to do this all the time, I can be pretty great most of the time but if I have a day where I lose my cool, and I raise my voice, then, you know, I've laid on the bed and cried thinking seriously that my kids would be better off without me because I raised my voice at them today and that immediately makes me like, if I'm not the good mother, today, I must be the bad mother. (Holly)

The good mother/bad mother dichotomy, and the intensive mothering ideology was often reinforced through participants' interactions with others. For instance, participants described experiences of being negatively evaluated and shamed by medical/health professionals, family members, friends, and members of the community, and the internalised guilt that came with making the 'wrong' parenting decision.

> I remember taking my son to the maternal child health nurse for the first time. And she made a comment of "oh he's dressed in denim already". And I said, "Oh, yeah, I thought they were cute". And I think she said, "you know, we don't usually dress them in denim until they're three months old". And I was instantly you know, I wanted to leave, I wanted to cry. I was like, Oh, my God, I've stuffed up already just walked in the door. (Phoebe)

Other mothers expressed that to be a mother is to be criticised, seemingly for every decision, as Phoebe indicated "And I think, too, I feel like being a mom is one of the most openly criticized things in society. People feel like they have the right to comment or the right to criticize or the right to judge". Many women expressed the low threshold for criticism of mothers, as demonstrated by Marie "it seems like anyone's willing to judge you for absolutely anything if you're out and about if you're a mother," meaning mothers struggle to feel like they can ever get it 'right.'

> I felt like I couldn't get it right and that I was going to keep stuffing up and people were going to keep finding every single thing that I couldn't do perfectly and tell me about it and exploit and shove it in my face and say you didn't get it enough, you haven't done enough here. (Phoebe)

Participants were also aware of the gendered disparity in standards to which parents were held accountable and the threshold for being a bad parent. Specifically, they described a sense of frustration at the acknowledgement and praise their partner would receive for attending to child-rearing tasks which mothers were expected to perform. Sometimes, but not always, these negative emotions were directed towards their partners, rather than the broader community or social norms.

> I try to do everything perfectly at home and in parenting, but also, you know, in terms of career planning, and going back to work and managing my studies … and sometimes I look at my partner and go oh, you've got it so easy, you just kind of clock on and off work every day. (Catherine)
> And fathers are just given, a medal for pushing a pram, basically, you know, whereas mothers, they, you know, one little slip up, and they're demonized by everyone, there is just this massive disparity on how we treat mothers and fathers in society. So yeah, just one little slip up that you make, and you're perpetually judged for being a bad Mother. (Natalie)
> I have a massive, massive issue with that, not only for myself, but for other moms as well like it would be really good to hear sometimes from a professional that you're doing a good job and that that in turn caused a lot of resentment to my husband because he's this fantastic dad and he's up on a pedestal and I'm the scum of the bloody earth while I'm doing everything. (Anna)

As a result, participants often altered their behaviours for fear of being perceived as a bad mother, even when making seemingly low stakes decisions. This was more commonly reported amongst first-time mothers.

> I had one (teething necklace) on my daughter and the fact that she (mother-in-law) didn't and even though I had my facts, and I had my research and I knew that it wasn't harmful to her but to please my mother in law, I took it off my daughter's neck instantly. (Faith)
> Look, when we're at home, I'm much more relaxed with them… there's just a ridiculous amount of pressure when you're out in public or out in someone's house, because children basically choose that moment to misbehave. Because they almost know that, you know, there won't get disciplined at someone else's house, or they just go nuts, or, you know, I'd be too embarrassed to yell at them or just something like that. So there is that pressure and that fear of how am I

going to come across as a bad mum, let alone as a woman if I do this, or don't do that. (Quin)

The internalised guilt and feeling of never being able to get it right was complicated by the conflicting advice given on how to be a good mother, much of which is perceived as opinion, not fact.

> But you know you go to maternal health appointments and stuff like that and they tell you opinion not fact in my honest opinion. Um I had one tell me that by not sleep training my son I'm going to break him and I'm going to raise a very anxious child because I'm not sleep training him. That is not fact. That is not true in any way, shape or form, she had no right to say that to me but it all weighs on you. (Anna)
> You just get a lot of advice. A lot of it conflicting, you know, make sure you set up a routine but don't be too rigid. You can't overfeed your baby. Or maybe you're feeding them too much. And they're not getting enough sleep. (Catherine)

Participants also noted their partner was either unaware of this pressure or dismissive of their concerns:

> Sometimes he looks at me and thinks Why do you make it so hard for yourself? Like, why do you fight with them to have, you know, healthy foods like veggies and whatever? Like just give them an easy meal, give yourself a break. (Rebecca)
> He doesn't realize the struggles behind what a mother will do. Like what. I think he just thinks everything falls into place, but he doesn't really understand why that occurred. (Jennifer)
> If ever I say that I am feeling under pressure that I feel overwhelmed, you know, he'll sort of dismiss it. Because he just thinks that it's an unnecessary pressure that I'm putting on myself and that other people don't actually expect or think that of me (Delia).

As demonstrated, women's perceptions of motherhood are shaped by their explicit and implicit ideologies: that of the intensive mother, the supermom ideal, and the good mother/bad mother dichotomy. Women perceive they are criticised for every aspect of their motherhood by outsiders, which leads to internalised guilt and changed parenting behaviours, and reinforces the idea that if a woman is not a good mother, she is a bad mother. These experiences are markedly different to how women perceive expectations on fathers, and many felt their partner did not understand or notice the pressure.

Transformation of Identity

While each participant experienced a unique change in their identity as they entered motherhood, there were key components shared amongst participants including a loss of their sense of self, a change to their sexual identity and sexual relationship with their partner, as well as integrating their new role as a mother into their existing identity. Across the theme it was evident that most (three-quarters of) participants found the transformation to be a difficult experience, though for a few it was described in mostly positive terms.

> It would nice if he kind of understood it a little bit more about what the actual experience is like when you kind of come from work and you suddenly have to stop working and kind of lose that role, that part of your identity and then just kind of do the same thing day after day, which sometimes doesn't feel like that meaningful when you're wiping down a table for the 40th time that day and unpacking the dishwasher and changing a nappy again and again. It's so much nicer at work. (Rebecca)

Some participants described having to juggle their identities in terms of their motherhood with their existing identity as an individual or in their careers, recognising that these pressures have changed over time.

> So I feel like I've always had both in mind or expected, I guess, from a family point of view, that you need to somehow be an amazing careerwoman, but also an amazing parent. So yeah, I think they've been pretty long standing. And it's just trying to figure out how to integrate both of them without necessarily driving myself into complete exhaustion. (Catherine)
> It's not all or nothing really trying to do a bit of everything. I think it's different for us than our parents cause of that pressure to have careers and work. (Rebecca)

This demonstrates the impact of the good mother ideology (that if mothers are not perfect at mothering, they are doing a bad job), conflicting with the idea of the supermom (the mum who can do it all), thus reinforcing the pressure women feel.

Around half of participants also perceived it was easier for their partner to transition to parenthood and integrate their role as a father with their existing identity, sometimes creating a sense of resentment of their partner.

> [Partner] went off to work and go to the gym, and life and everyday living doesn't change for the parents that goes off to work compared to the mum, for example,

she decides to stay home, and how unprepared I was for that, but then, in turn, was almost taking it out on [partner], because I just felt almost jealous of his freedom. (Quin)
> Like sometimes I think all you know, would be lovely to him to experience like what it's like just doing it day in and day out day in and day out. Sometimes I get a little bit resentful, that he gets a nice break at work. (Rebecca)
> I do I suppose for the lack of a better word, resent him a small ways at times, when he whinges being tired. But I understand that he's tired, and he's working, and then coming home, and I'm giving him things to do here at the house and with her, and I get a little bit annoyed at him for that sometimes, because he, Yeah, I don't think that he understands everything, you know, all the time when it comes to my fatigue. (Faith)
> Before kids we each managed our own finances and had an easy understanding of where and who contributed to what. We were each other's main priority. I think it's impossible to not change after kids, but it felt like my life was turned upside down, whereas he could almost control what parts would change for him, and I resented him for this. He went back to work, kept up his hobbies and social life, when I felt like I was chained to the house, and experiencing a level of exhaustion that I never knew existed. (Shannon)

For some women, the pressures and time demand of motherhood led to a change to their perception of themselves or their dynamic as a romantic and sexual partner:

> My focus shifted to 100% [child]. I was an afterthought, my husband was an afterthought, he really didn't cope. I wasn't able to do any of the cooking and cleaning 'cause my son was very clinging to me. Um, yeah so we've had to work very, very hard on remembering why we're together in the first place to be honest with you. (Anna)
> A lot of that's me. I'm not ready, but it's not my body that's not ready. It's my mind and to me like you know he has to put in a little bit of work to get me to the stage where I feel comfortable enough again. 'cause I do feel like I'm losing my virginity again. So very strange, a very strange feeling. Yeah, and he sort of hasn't come to the party on that one very much. (Anna)
> I am not in a place at the moment and nor have I been the most of my pregnancy, to be who he needs to be in that respect. I try to make up for in other ways by being a good housewife. Um, but I think mentally and emotionally, I have changed because I'm just not

sexually motivated at the moment, especially whilst breastfeeding. (Faith)

I might be running a bath, but I might be trying to prepare dinner at the same time. And my partner will be doing his own thing, whether that be having a drink or playing games or, you know. So, my consistency of trying to be a good mother to my son certainly impacts what I would have usually done in our day-to-day routine with my partner. (Isabelle)

Factors that indicated a positive perception of the change in identity included a strong sense of achievement from their role as a mother, a longstanding desire to be a mother and an openness and acceptance of the physical changes experienced during pregnancy, childbirth and post-partum. Ella noted "It means the world to me, it's been my dream to be a mum. I love watching and teaching these little kids and I get such a kick out of watching them grow."

Several other potentially protective factors were identified that assisted participants to more easily integrate aspects of their identity which in turn positively impacted the romantic relationship. These included when participants were able to return to work, felt supported by their partner, maintained their independence and dedicated time to their relationships.

I think after the birth of my first child, I realized really quickly that if I wasn't cognitively stimulated, so I wasn't engaged in kind of a lot of I think work that altered and used my brain that I probably wasn't the best person to always be at home. So I think that I learned pretty quickly that me be a working mum probably allowed me to be a better mother. (Georgina)
I found that when I went back to work and had success outside of the home, then I felt better about myself when I came back into the home at the end of the day. (Phoebe)
He's supportive with that, he's encouraging for me to just get out of the house as well and do stuff with girlfriends. (Holly)

In summary, the pressures experienced by mothers to be a 'good mum' and the realities of raising a child often conflicted with mothers' other identities, and sometimes with the perception of whether they were a good partner. The perception that fathers were not under the same pressure, and could continue living out their other identities, such as at work, led to feelings of frustration and resentment. Mothers who were able to maintain some identity outside of their children, particularly when fathers encouraged this, seemed to fair better with the transition and pressures.

Entrenchment of Gender Roles Through Childrearing

The third main theme arose as participants described traditional gender roles and how these were expressed in their relationship with their partner. Almost all participants were aware they were considered the expert in the relationship regarding child-rearing, whereby some participants would actively seek parenting information, teach their partner how to parent, and in some instances take a mothering role with their partner/father of their child. These ideas further demonstrate internalisation of the intensive mothering ideology, in which women are considered the expert parent.

We try to raise them as much as I can, using gentle parenting… Most of that has come from me, and that I've talked about the benefits of parenting this way. And some of the research I've done in that area. And things I've looked into how it would look like and how it would work. And then he kind of takes that on board. (Kristy)
So, since having children, I realized that I probably play a very distinctively kind of mothering role to [partner]. It's weird to discover, but also a role that has me almost teaching all the time, which I've only kind of just realized that. (Georgina)

Almost half of the participants' revealed that they conformed to gender roles in the division of paid work, household tasks and parenting load, which for some mothers occurred after childbirth because they felt they were unable to contribute to the relationship in the same way they had previously (i.e., financially and sexually), as Faith stated, "I am not in a place at the moment and nor have I been the most of my pregnancy, to be who he needs to be in that respect. I try to make up for in other ways by being a good housewife".

This division of roles, including finances, was for some a source of tension, while for others provided a sense of security.

He has the much higher wage so it was no question that he would return to work. He could, and has, gone out and bought a boat, a motorbike, whatever he likes without it being a discussion prior. Whereas my purchases, like regular take away coffees, have needed to be explained and defended. (Shannon)
Financially, mentally, physically, in every way possible, he makes me feel safe and secure. Financially he looks after us as a family. And he does nothing but support me and our girls. (Ella)

Some mothers maintained their role as the primary care-giver, and would exclude their partner from child-rearing decisions, thereby engaging in gatekeeping. Maternal gate-keeping refers to maternal beliefs and behaviours that may support (gate-opening) or limit (gate-closing) the father's involvement in child-rearing and interactions with their child (Allen and Hawkins, 1999; Schoope-Sullivan et al., 2008; Schoope-Sullivan et al., 2015). However, most moth-ers recognised the impact on their spouse, and actively worked to engage in more gate-opening behaviour.

> I just I guess I spend a lot more time with the kids than he does. So I guess in some respects, the load kind of falls on me a bit more. Do I want to change it? Not really. Sometimes I think I do. Like sometimes I think all you know, would be lovely to him to experience like what it's like just doing it day in and day out day in and day out. (Rebecca)
>
> There was with my son with introducing solids, I'd said that I want to do it this particular way, because I've read of the benefits of it. And it biologically makes more sense to me. And he felt like he wasn't having a say in anything. Because, you know, I was the one making all the parenting decisions because I was at home. I was breastfeeding. So there was a whole aspect of that he wasn't involved in. (Kristy)
>
> I used to micromanage him in the way of parenting stuff and it really put a strain on our relationship. So I had to stop and I literally had to tell him you parent how you want and I'll parent how I want and um you know, hopefully out of that we can we can raise the son our son the way we wanted to. (Anna)

The difference in cognitive load was an issue of contention for participants as they felt unsupported by their partner (i.e., in terms of household tasks and parental responsibil-ity). Some participants made sense of this by parenting or micromanaging their partner which seemed to add to par-ticipants' cognitive load.

> I have to ask, even down to um you know, I'll take my son for a nap and he's still breastfeeding, so he's still on the boob and I can't move and I'll message my husband and be like why you sitting at the lounge room watching TV. Can you fold the washing? and until I ask that question, it won't get done. And that sort of keeps the burden very much on me that you know, I have to look around the house for the cooking stuff that we need. I have to look around the house for any food that we're going to need when I do the food shopping. (Anna)

In summary, the enacting of gender roles in a relationship were reinforced through division of household and child labour after childbirth. The idea of mother as expert par-ent echoed the intensive mothering ideology. While some of this division of labour was necessary (e.g., the necessity of breastfeeding children), for some women this reinforced a sense of resentment in their partner that they weren't sub-ject to the same change in their lifestyle and roles. For other women, their role as primary caregiver was contextualised positively, or something they maintained through exclud-ing the father from parenting decisions. The added cogni-tive load of keeping track of tasks was a particular point of frustration.

Positive Relationship Dynamics: Supportive Fathers and Challenging Gender Roles

There were several factors which participants described as positively contributing to their satisfaction with their part-ner/father of their children, including receiving emotional support, their awareness and challenging of good mother ideology, an open communication and interaction style, and being involved in childrearing and household tasks, often subverting traditional gender roles.

When participants perceived their partner was supportive prior to having children or were able to provide support fol-lowing childbirth, they described their relationship in more positive terms.

> To support us, you know, like one of the other things I just can't get past is always wanting to be there, for every prenatal, postnatal appointments, every doc-tor's appointment for the children, the immunizations, the maternal health nurse checks the parents group, like my husband was the only one of two fathers that attended mother's group meetings with us…he's very, very hands on and very invested. (Georgina)

When participants felt they were able to openly communi-cate around each person's role within the relationship, had a cohesive parenting style, or communicated about the chal-lenges they experienced as a mother, they tended to describe the relationship in positive terms, a pattern noted most con-sistently amongst second-time mothers.

> I'm happy that we have a good dialogue, a good way of communicating. So that's something that we've had to work on even more so having after having a child together, um, I'm happy that I feel like I have a real partner. And I can rely on him. So, I feel like he's really dependable. And he's a great dad. (Louise)

We might have some slight differences of opinion. But mostly we agree on how to raise children and you know what the boundaries are, and what's best for them. I guess probably what changed I guess is we've come together, like our relationship is stronger. I would say yeah, definitely stronger. We have a very strong common goal. (Olivia)

Some partners were aware of good mother ideology, or they supportively challenged participants' own beliefs around being a good mother, which participants described in positive and supportive terms.

He'll, you know, make sure that I do a reality check and be like, no, you're not doing a bad job. Like you're doing great he's just a baby, babies scream, babies don't want to sleep when we want them to. (Catherine).

When participants described a greater sense of connection and communication, this was often in the context of a greater willingness to involve the father in child-rearing, whereby the parenting was described as more of a team effort.

So the kinds of conversations, I guess, where we sit down, and I say, No, this is how I feel about [parenting decision]. He says how he feels about it. And we may not agree, but I guess we come to some sort of middle ground or understanding of what probably is the most appropriate response? And then we re-evaluate it. So discuss it again later on. (Phoebe)

So there are times where I say to him, well I mean, I don't know, you know this stuff better than I do, so you tell me. And there's times where, if it's more my expertise, he'll default to what I know. So I think if we disagreed on something, we're both very practical evidence based kind of people. So we'd say, All right, let's, let's do some research. (Holly)

Fathers who could anticipate the mothers' needs or were more involved in childrearing and household tasks were described in terms of more positive dynamics. For some of these women, this was described explicitly as not being aligned with traditional gender roles

But for me the way that he supported me was perfect. He was there when I needed him, like, you know, I didn't have to worry about cooking or anything. He made me multiple cups of tea a day, you know, and I'd sometimes only have a couple of sips and then I'd sleep or whatever, and then I'd wake up and I'd be a fresh one. (Jennifer)

I am actually really lucky in comparison to a lot of people what he's a really hard working bloke, but he still comes home. And, you know, it's fairly equal, equal playing field with the whole bedtime routine when he juggles his work hours around so he can be home for the hard part of the day just trying to bath them and feed them and you know, bed and all of that. And, you know, he's just as much part of that as me. And household chores and things like that, you know, we really think, you know, we found a really nice kind of balance of that. (Rebecca)

My partner is such a, like, I hate this cliche term, but hands on parent because you never describe women really as being hands on parents. But I think for a guy, and especially compared to men, in my own family where Italians in particular very traditional, men are very hands off. It was really added, I think, to my love and trust in him that he's just, you know, I can leave him for a day with the baby, you know, with some express milk and he, you know, even he'll come home from work and he'll do a bedtime story and do a night feed and talk to the baby and hang out while I can go and shower or do other things. (Catherine)

To summarise, the features of a positive, supportive relationship as described by our participants included fathers/partners being aware of the challenges mothers face, and being willing to supportively challenge these, as well as an open and two-way communication style. Relationships in which fathers were more involved in child-rearing decisions or took up more of the division of household labour were described in more positive terms.

Discussion

The current study examined women's experiences of good mother ideology and their romantic relationship and revealed that participants' experiences were diverse, complex, and dynamic. Exploring how women navigate good mother ideology, their identity as a partner and negotiation of parental tasks in their romantic relationship, interviews with participants revealed four main themes: discourses on motherhood: criticisms of mothers and internalised guilt, (2) transformation of identity, (3) entrenchment of gender roles through childrearing, and (4) positive relationship dynamics: supportive fathers and challenging gender roles. These findings revealed participants' journey through motherhood to be a challenging experience as they contended with a sense of loss of their previous identity whilst also integrating their new role as a mother with their existing identity. Mothers were also required to balance their existing commitments

in their relationship and personal life with those of caring for a newborn, whose needs were immediate and often took priority over the needs of the romantic relationship. These participants reflected on this transition as a shift in the sense of connection and cohesion with their partner. Regarding the negotiation of parental tasks, mothers' experiences were mixed with themes related to communication, quality of the coparenting relationship and their partner's awareness of good mother ideology.

Factors Affecting Relationship Satisfaction

Consistent with previous literature (Doss & Rhoades, 2017), some participants reported a sense of dissatisfaction in their relationship. Mothers' descriptions of their relationship dynamics can be somewhat contextualised in the changes that almost inevitably occur as a child is introduced into a family, including decreased quality partner time, a change in work-family balance and a loss of individuality, which for our participants was associated with increased conflict (Levesque et al., 2020; Van-Scheppingen et al., 2018). In some instances, the sense of frustration our participants felt towards their partners was due to factors that could be directly controlled or addressed in the relationship such as the partner's behaviours (e.g., partner prioritising personal interests/hobbies over parenting responsibilities), an uneven allocation of domestic and child-rearing tasks, and a lack of communication or inconsistent actions following parenting discussions, which is consistent with Levesque et al. (2020) and Pollitt et al.'s (2018) findings. Work-family arrangements in Australia remain gendered, with fathers working an average of 75 h per week, comprised of 46 h of paid work, 16 h of housework and 13 h of childcare. Comparably, mothers worked an average of 77 h, 20 of which were paid work, 30 h of housework and 27 h of childcare (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018). Regardless of number of hours of work, Christopher (2021) argues that men tend to think of division of labour quantitatively (the number of times the task is completed), women think of it qualitatively (the quality of task completion). In context, this differing perception of household and childcare labour may explain some of the frustration among the women in this study. This finding further reinforces previous literature that facilitating communication between partners in a relationship around the division of labour, particularly regarding child-rearing labour, may improve relationship satisfaction.

For others, their sense of frustration appeared to be towards issues outside of their partner's control, though they still directed this frustration towards their partner, or their beliefs were manifested through interactions with their partner. Examples included the natural disparity in child-rearing tasks (only biological females can bear children and breastfeed) and gendered difference in parental leave, with 93.5% of primary parental leave being taken by women in Australia during 2018–2019. Primary parental level is taken by the parent identified as having greater responsibility for the day-to-day care of the child. Primary parental leave is the most likely to affect a person's career trajectory (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Additional examples include the discrepancy in the length of parental leave based on gender, the gendered difference in societal pressures on parents, perceived lack of change to their partner's lifestyle and perceived ease of adjustment following childbirth for fathers compared to mothers. While some mothers explicitly stated that fathers are subject to lower standards of good parenting from 'society,' many women expressed resentment towards their partners that their lives didn't appear to change as much after parenthood. Future research would benefit from exploring the cognitive processes and familial factors behind this resentment, in an effort to improve communication and relationship functioning.

With regards to our first research question, then, even though some parenting tasks are gendered (e.g., breastfeeding), and the pressures on mothers as prescribed by dominant mothering discourses was evident in participants descriptions of their interactions with their partners, when participants described a more open communication style, fathers' acknowledgement of the struggles mother was facing, and fathers' willingness to pick up household and childcare tasks, it was associated with more positive descriptions of the relationship. Thus, although mothers described pressure in terms of the good mother ideology, subverting traditional gender norms through a team-based approach to child-rearing appeared to be associated with a healthier, happier relationship. Facilitating fathers' involvement in childrearing may not only improve child outcomes (per Wilson & Prior, 2011), but may also help mothers more easily navigate the transition to parenthood by reducing the impact of dominant mothering discourses. This observation aligns with evidence from Pakistan that father involvement in the first year of life is associated with better maternal health outcomes (Maselko et al., 2019), and implies father involvement should be contextualised beyond the benefits for children's development.

Mothers' Identity as a Relationship Partner

Consistent with earlier findings, participants from the present study shared experiences on their journey to motherhood involving a loss of, change in, and acceptance of their identity (Emmanuel et al., 2011; Laney et al., 2015). For some, the integration of their role as a mother to their existing identity was characterised by a time of confusion as they questioned who they are as a person, re-evaluating

their values and reassessing their priorities. The integration of the new identity as a mother into the multiple identities of a woman is one that has previously been described in qualitative research as a process of fracturing: where women experienced self-loss and eventually a regaining of a new identity with motherhood included (Laney et al., 2015). First time mothers in this sample highlighted the difficulty in accepting the physical change their body had gone through during pregnancy and delivery and was mostly contextualised in terms of sexual intimacy with their partner. This may have been maintained through media representations of postpartum women and the pressure to 'bounce back' to their appearance pre-pregnancy (Nippert et al., 2020). This is also perpetuated by the 'supermom' ideal where mothers need to be perfect in all areas of their life (Choi et al., 2007; Douglas & Michaels 2004). The conflict between a need for physical intimacy with their partner, and the need to adjust to their new bodies implies further work is needed to support couples to return to intimacy after the birth of a child, and that this may extend beyond simply waiting the recommended 6–8 weeks postpartum before engaging in sexual activity (McDonald et al., 2013), and aligns with other qualitative research suggesting discussions around physical intimacy postpartum need to include psychosocial aspects, not just focus on physical recovery (DeMaria et al., 2019).

These unattainable and unrealistic expectations meant mothers needed to prioritise their time and energy, which negatively impacted the romantic relationship given the immediacy of children's needs and the financial strain associated with reduced income and parental leave (Brough et al., 2008). Many mothers' occupations generally required further study, their careers were often a strong part of their identity, and they are more likely to return to the workforce. For those mothers who did return to work, this reduced potential financial strain, allowing a sense of achievement outside of motherhood, a sense of financial contribution to the household, and the opportunity for an even division of household labour. Regarding our second research question then, mothers' renditions of the good mother, and adjusting to the needs of a child, impacted their perceptions of themselves in other identities, including as a partner and as an individual. Women who felt they could maintain a sense of individuality outside of motherhood, and/or for whom partners were encouraging and supporting, described an easier transition to and experience of motherhood. Supporting women's transition to 'woman and mother' (Finlayson et al., 2020, p. 17) then requires supporting women to navigate this transition, including how to navigate the pressures of modern motherhood discourse.

Fathers' Involvement in Parenting

Regarding the third research question of interest, while good mother ideology dictates that mothers are the experts, some participants indicated they challenged this ideology by encouraging their partner to have an active role in parenting decisions and parenting responsibilities, negotiating with their partner about the best way to raise their children (Murphy et al., 2017; Schoope-Sullivan et al., 2008). Common aspects of these mothers' narratives included open communication around child-rearing, discussing expectations of each parents' role, and conversing about children before pregnancy, which was apparent when contrasted with narratives of participants who discouraged their partners from being involved in child-rearing. Participants who encouraged partner involvement in child-rearing or felt their partner was exposed to the same pressure to be a good parent, also allowed their partner to develop their own parenting style, thereby fostering their partner's confidence and identity as a parent. Mothers' parenting is heavily influenced by the relationship with their partner, with a cohesive parenting dynamic associated with increased maternal gate-opening, and a more positive relationship between mother and child (Baker et al., 2018; Christopher et al., 2015; Peltz et al., 2018). In this study, these gate-opening aspects were more frequently reported in second-time mothers. These findings are consistent with previous research by Krieg (2007) who suggests the partner relationship may act as a buffer for stress in mothers of more than one child.

On the other hand, mothers who conformed to good mother ideology described gate-closing behaviours that restrict or exclude fathers from child rearing as it may be perceived as relinquishing paternal responsibility. As mothers are viewed as the expert, sharing the parenting load may be perceived as them being unable to perform their duties as a mother and therefore perceived as a 'bad' mother. This reluctance to share parental tasks may further add to mothers' cognitive load and an already unequal division of household labour. Over time, this unequal division may become an issue of contention in the partner relationship (Baker et al., 2018; Narciso et al., 2018; Peltz et al., 2018). Research should focus on developing the strength and cohesiveness of co-parenting relationships to improve the health outcomes of all members of the family unit.

Limitations and Future Directions

Certain limitations should be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings of this study. The aim of this study was not to provide generalisable outcomes for all parents, but to provide a description of the experiences of these mothers in relation to good mother ideology and

their partner relationships. That said, most participants were employed, earning an above-average household salary, and had no religious affiliation, and thus their experiences may not reflect the experiences of other groups of women.

There was variability in average household income, culture, and religious affiliation in this sample. For context, Australia is a multi-cultural country with 27.6% of the population born overseas with the top five ancestries being English (33%), Australian (29.9%), Irish (9.5%), Scottish (8.6%) and Chinese (5%). However, there were no participants who identified as black women or Indigenous Australians. The experiences of mothers in terms of how they navigate the pressures of motherhood are likely to impact the experience of parenting. For instance, low-income Black women in the US experiences differ in many ways from those described in this study (Elliott et al., 2015). Future qualitative and quantitative research could build upon the current study by further exploring these factors and possible confounding variables associated with these demographics, for instance, access to additional support, financial stress, and religious identity. Additionally, further exploration of the number of children, biological and non-biological children, and multiple births is warranted as these factors can impact mothers' satisfaction in the relationship with their partner (Kowal et al., 2021).

There was also a potential social desirability bias, as some participants may have wanted to portray their motherhood journey and relationship with their partner as positive, as indicated by a discrepancy in how participants spoke about their relationship and inconsistency in their use of language when describing the allocation of child-rearing tasks. An anonymous quantitative study is warranted and may overcome issues with potential bias as it will provide mothers with the opportunity to openly share their experiences without fear of judgement.

While there are some studies exploring fathers' perceptions (e.g., Coles et al., 2018), few have measured dyadic perceptions, which would allow comparisons to be made based on gender, and the results used to further shape clinical practice in relationships counselling. Also, as the present study highlighted how stereotyped gender roles reinforce good mother ideology in committed heterosexual relationships, it would be enlightening to explore how these gender roles are expressed in more diverse relationships.

Practice Implications

The findings from the current study have several implications for maternal health and wellbeing. The findings of this research could be applied to educate families and health professionals about good mother ideology and how this may impact various aspects of mothers' lives, including

their partner relationships, at least for Australian women. For instance, assisting mothers to be aware of how the pressure to be a good mum affects their perceptions of and interactions with their partners, and helping fathers to notice and support mothers in their negotiating of shifting identities. Consequently, parents may be better informed about the importance of communication and how to support each other, as well as societal pressures. Psychoeducational groups may inform women and new families of good mother ideology. They can then be supported in discussing these concerns in mothers' groups, during medical appointments, and if required seek further psychological support to address these concerns. Training programs for health professionals would help raise awareness of the potentially negative impacts of their interactions with mothers and potential reinforcement of good mother ideology, which would assist in screening and sensitivity in addressing partner concerns during antenatal and postnatal appointments.

In terms of relationship counselling, these findings can be used to inform formulation and treatment planning in clinical settings. This also highlights the importance of assessing both mothers' and the partners' health and wellbeing as well as the interaction between the two, rather than solely focusing on the child's growth and development. Whilst these interventions can be implemented at an individual level, good mother ideology remains prevalent at a societal level. To evoke change, it is important to reshape what we contextualise as 'good' motherhood, challenging and changing social norms related to gendered tasks of parenting. Media campaigns and policy should be implemented to support this, including more diverse imagery of motherhood and changing health practitioner language to avoid reinforcing the tenets of good motherhood (e.g., Attarha et al., 2016).

Conclusion

This qualitative study extends our understanding of the motherhood experience among cisgender heterosexual women, specifically the dynamic interaction between good mother ideology and the relationship with their partner. The findings support previous research demonstrating that subscribing to good mother ideology is associated with conforming to traditional gender roles, which impacts how mothers navigate their partner's involvement in child-rearing and contributes to a change in their identity as a partner after becoming a mother. With this knowledge, health professionals may be better informed and sensitive to good mother ideology and how they may inadvertently reinforce it. Health professionals should also be more attentive to the dynamics of the partner relationship rather than solely focused on maternal and child wellbeing when seeing

patients who are mothers. Ultimately, a better understanding of good mother ideology at the societal level is necessary to help mothers navigate the challenges of motherhood and remove the unrealistic expectations placed on mothers.

Declarations

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