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Young mothers' identity work

Life course, Risk, & Good motherhood

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Abstract

Background. Most studies about young motherhood have focused on identifying how young mothers can be supported or on how notions of young motherhood are produced. However, there is still limited knowledge about the maternal identity work of young mothers. The overarching aim of this thesis was to explore the maternal identity work of young mothers and, as part of this, to study young motherhood in relation to different forms of parenting support.

Method. For the first three papers, 17 young Swedish mothers aged 13–25 were interviewed 1 or 2 times each (in total 31 interviews). The interview conversations were analysed from the perspective of discursive psychology. For the fourth paper, three Facebook groups that offered parenting support online to young mothers were studied. Data from the three Facebook groups were analysed through network analysis, online ethnography, and telephone interviews with two administrators. The ethnographical data and interviews in this particular substudy were analysed through thematic content analysis.

Theoretical perspectives. The identity work of the interviewed young mothers was analysed in relation to theories and debates about parenting and the life course, the risk society, and the notion of “good motherhood”.

Findings. The findings of the thesis suggest (Papers 1, 2, and 3) that whether the interviewed young mothers followed or deviated from their expected life course seemed to have an impact on the degree to which their mothering was seen as “risky”. Furthermore (Paper 2), the mothers appeared to be discursively divided into three different levels of riskiness in their social contexts: *less risky* mothers, *high risk* mothers, and mothers seen as *too risky* for mothering. The mothers’ level of presumed riskiness seemed in turn to have meanings for which dominant and/or alternative motherhood discourses they could access and draw upon in a trustworthy way (or which motherhood discourses they lacked access to) when presenting their maternal positions and making sense of their maternal identity in relation to the world around them. Two emerging motherhood discourses were identified: *youthful motherhood* (Paper 1) and *common-sense motherhood* (Paper 2). Support from the young mothers’ own mothers (Paper 3) had contradictory meanings for their identities and functioned as a form of guidance into motherhood while at the same time limiting the young mothers’ possibilities to take on the position as the “main-mother” of her child. Young mothers seemed to prefer peer-parenting support online (Paper 4) in closed Facebook groups above participating in governmental expert-guided face-to-face support groups.

Keywords

young motherhood, life course, risk, good motherhood, youthful motherhood, common sense motherhood

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