Modern society’s representation of motherhood is placing unrealistic expectations on women’s identity and undermining their sense of self, a new study has found.

Mothers of all ages were given the opportunity to tell their own stories and share experiences of the transition into motherhood to researchers at the University of Sunderland. From this, the findings identified how complex and difficult transitioning into the role was and the importance of deconstructing the myths around being the perfect parent.

When the Duchess of Cambridge, Kate Middleton, stood on the steps of St Mary’s Hospital in London, shortly after given birth to her third child, she was revered in the media for her postpartum perfection, despite the result being down to the intensive efforts of a whole team of people.

However, these images and similar impressions of mums being able to simply ‘snap back’ after giving birth are placing unrealistic expectations on new mothers, the study found, amongst a whole of host of other pressures being felt as they navigate the journey of motherhood.

Criminology lecturer Samantha Reveley, who led the research: Deconstructing Myths of Motherhood: Young Women and the Making of Positive Future Selves, said all the women found the interview process both therapeutic and emotional, and finally felt their voices were being heard about the realities of motherhood.

“As I interviewed each woman about their new role, which had completely changed their perspective of themselves and the world around them, there was a very common theme running through – trying to meet everyone else’s expectations because of what we are socialised to think and supposed to be as a woman and as a mother.

“The way they felt things were going to be wasn’t actually how they were. They talked about the pressure of going back to work soon after giving birth while balancing baby duties, looking after the house, conforming to that very natural earth mother role, breastfeeding, relationship pressures; they felt if they didn’t conform to these pressures they would be marginalised and seen as poor parents.”

She added: “Social media has also had such an influence on negative perceptions, especially when we’re talking about Instagram and influencers looking perfect all through pregnancy, simply ‘snapping back’ into shape weeks after giving birth. This creates a lot of insecurities and low self-esteem about your new self of sense and new body. It’s not the reality. These are ridiculous expectations placed on women. The image of Kate Middleton hours after the birth of Louis sparked a movement on social media of women posting the reality of what it’s actually like after birth. This was incredibly empowering to confront those myths.”

The study found many of the women described feelings of guilt because they struggled to meet their own expectations of motherhood.

Joanne, 25

“Everyone else was doing amazing and then there was me...struggling to get out of bed in the morning, nevermind look after the baby. I was forcing myself to get up and do my hair and make-up and just to keep going through the motions and smiling. If people asked how I was I would say how wonderful being a mum was and how much I loved doing it because they didn’t really want to know. It was ridiculous, but I didn’t feel like I could say anything without people thinking I was a bad mum.”

Some of the women, struggled with mothering practices such as breastfeeding and others struggled with the guilt of wanting time for themselves.

Lucy, 31

“I had to go back to work pretty much straight away. He was only four months old, but we couldn’t afford for me not to work. It was a nightmare. I went from being in this great little bubble with the baby to all of a sudden being back at work and having to worry about childcare, food shopping, washing, work. I just couldn’t cope with having to be everything and everywhere all at once. I ended up...
having a breakdown before I could accept that enough was enough and something had to give.”

All of the women reported changes in their relationships with their partner, friends and family. Several of the women experienced relationship breakdown and attributed this to the different adaption of their partners to parenthood. The women described how they drifted from many of their friends, however, they became much closer to their own mothers.

Louise, 27

“My partner wasn’t a hands-on dad. I did the night feeds, the nappy changes etc. He was just there. The relationship changed because we had someone to look after but I was the only one actually looking after him. It was my life that changed. I couldn’t just go out with my friends when I wanted to, but he still did. A lot.”

Many of the women initially felt profound self-doubt in their mothering abilities. Over time, however, their confidence grew as they saw for themselves that they were capable of caring for their babies.

Lucy, 31

“I just hadn’t done anything for me since becoming a mum. Everything always revolved around the baby and doing things for him. When I actually started to go and do stuff for myself it felt amazing and really helped me find myself again as clichéd as that sounds.”

As they became more comfortable with their role as a mother it helped to stabilise their identities. All of the women described a sense of loss as they transitioned into motherhood.

Claire, 21

“I feel like since I have had children I’ve lost who I am because now I am on the school run I am just known as Jake or Daniel’s mam. You don’t really have an identity anymore. If someone wants to be speak to you you’re just referred to as so and so’s mam.”

They described how those around them consistently reduced them down to only their role as a mother, with this reduction contributing to this sense of loss.

Lecturer Samantha explained: “It was not until they adjusted to their new role as a mother that they were able to begin to establish a balance between being a mother and being their own individual person.”

Four key themes emerged from this research: emotional turmoil, reconstructing relationships, getting comfortable with baby and rediscovering the self.

“Each of these themes linked to periods of identity change as the women negotiated points of instability on their journey to incorporate motherhood into their reality, “ explained Samantha.

“The research showed that the transition into motherhood is a complex and multi-faceted process which requires extensive identity reformulation.”

To read the full study click here.

Samantha Reveley (pictured) is a Lecturer in Criminology, Criminology Admissions Tutor and Personal Tutor for Level 4 Criminology students. She is also a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

Samantha’s expertise centers on criminological and sociological theory, with her teaching being focused within these areas. She is currently completing her PhD which is funded by the ESRC and explores how young people reformulate their identity as they transition through the desistance process and cease offending.

She is also the Scheme Coordinator for Northumbria Local Appropriate Adult Scheme which works to support vulnerable offenders in police custody.