

Agné Matulaité

'I've Got You Under My Skin': The Embodied Relationship with the Baby Within

Pregnancy is an undeniably important and acutely physical process. Some authors (Kristeva 1982; Draper 2003; Young 2005) believe that, experientially speaking, in pregnancy when two beings are housed within a single body, the body challenges or 'disrupts' its traditional boundaries. Therefore it is quite likely that pregnancy intensifies or alters an expectant mother's sense of embodiment and even that 'this "epiphanic" body episode may illuminate the relationship we, in the modern West, have with our materiality' (Warren and Brewis 2004, p.220) more generally.

However, with the exception of several contemporary philosophical and social research pieces (for example, Young 1984; Tyler 2000; Bailey 2001; Upton and Han 2003, Warren and Brewis 2004; Gil-Rodriguez 2008; Nicolson et al 2010), and the psychoanalytic work of Deutsch (1947), Ussher (1989), Pines (1993), Raphael-Leff (1995, 2009) and Kristeva (1982), the very topic of body experience in pregnancy is still very much overlooked within the field of clinical and developmental psychology. Also, as 'a transient subjectivity' (Tyler 2000) and as a subjective experience, pregnant embodiment (as well as post-birth, post-lactation embodiment), according to Baraitser (2009, p.124), still remains 'curiously unmapped, unthought and perhaps unthinkable' as challenging the masculine principles of individuality, non-contradiction and singular temporality.

Subjective Embodiment

According to existential phenomenological philosophers, in ordinary circumstance we experience our bodies as our reality frames, providing us with both opportunities and limitations, allowing us to understand and perceive others (Husserl 1983; Ricoeur 1973/1990, 1976). Bodies are perceived as both objects and subjects, as part of our internal reality ['the lived body'], and as part of our external reality ['the objective body'] (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2006). Our bodies are a subjective and indivisible part of ourselves (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2006; Straus 1969; Stewart 1998) or even indistinguishably intertwined and 'criss-crossed' as part of the world, as 'flesh-of-the-world' (Merleau-Ponty 1964/1968¹).

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This is formulated most explicitly in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2006) sustained argument for the founding role that perception plays in our engagement with, and understanding of, the world. The world, according to Merleau-Ponty is something we live in and engage with in a bodily way. Consciousness, he argues, is practical, perceptual and embodied; it is an act of the whole body engaged in (or grounded in) the world, which both constitutes us and is constituted by us. 'The body is the vehicle of being in the world', claims Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962, p.82), adding that it is also the 'horizon latent in all our experience...and anterior to every determining thought' (p.92). Thus, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the body not only connects us to the world, but also offers us the way to be in, and understand, that world.

The importance of embodied experience in understanding the world had many followers within the postmodern phenomenological tradition. For example, Gendlin (1996), following Heidegger, agrees that people first act and interact pre-reflectively.. The body lives and 'knows' the situation directly, Gendlin argues. This is echoed by Todres, who claims that subjective experience is carried by the body in its 'pre-separated multiplicity' (Todres 2007, p.21). Furthermore, from a feminist phenomenological perspective, the philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1949/1996), points out that the only real reflection of female sexual difference is in the way women themselves experience their bodies.

Pregnant embodiment

Whereas in traditional psychology and psychological research the body and psyche are still placed in very much parallel universes, I would like to argue, following the existential phenomenological philosophers discussed above, that not only can we not separate the two, but also that a pregnant body provides an additional dimension to the embodied experience. This, I argue, is partly due to a woman's experience of a drastic change in her own body, the novelty of a baby's body within and the internal and external boundaries of the body themselves being in flux.

Merleau-Ponty argues that: 'I discover things as being "tall" or "short" on the basis of my bodily orientation to it. If my mobility is impaired, I face a world of "restrictive potentialities" of things "too low" or "too far"' (quoted in Finlay 2011, p.55). If this is the case, then perhaps once my body changes in pregnancy, I could also experience my lived world or people differently. When something changes, our awareness of our body is suddenly amplified (Van Manen 1998). Such heightened awareness of one's body has generally been

considered in the context of illness (Radley 2000; Svenaeus 2001, 2011), but it could also be argued to occur through the process of childbearing (Young 1984; Bondas and Eriksson 2001; Gil-Rodriguez 2008, p.95).

Subjective Bodily Experience in Pregnancy

Accordingly, the study conducted for this paper, aimed to explore women's own accounts of how they experienced their bodies in pregnancy and during their postpartum year. I wanted to capture the complexity of this phenomenon through a close and fine-grained examination of individual accounts and the meanings produced within them. In order to do this I used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith and Osborn, 2003; Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009; Eatough and Smith 2008) to analyse transcribed, semi-structured interviews with a small number of women who were followed throughout their pregnancies and into the transition to motherhood. This approach was chosen as it incorporates both a descriptive (phenomenological) and interpretive (analytical) way of approaching data, thus giving equal weight to the voices of both the analysed and the analyser.

On the one hand this project is phenomenological in that there is no expectation of testing certain hypotheses to find or confirm a certain theoretical model. On the contrary, in the process of my research, in fact even before it was finished, I was trying to make sure that I would keep myself as open as I could to the subjective world as it is lived by the women analysed in this study. This meant constantly reflecting on and differentiating my own personal experience and knowledge in the area addressed. This approach also extended to doing the literature review after, not before, the study.

On the other hand, this study is also interpretative and consistent with the main idea of IPA: that it is not possible to access an individual's life world directly or completely. Access depends on, and is both complicated and assisted by, the researcher's own experience and conceptions. There is no clear and unmediated window into the life experience of others. Investigating how events and objects are experienced and given meaning requires interpretative activity on the part of the researcher, which Smith and Osborn (2003) describe as a dual process or 'a double hermeneutic', in which 'the participants are trying to make sense of their world; [and] the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world' (Smith and Osborn 2003, p.51).

Another feature of such research is its idiographic emphasis and commitment to the detailed examination of a phenomenon (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009), resulting in a

narrative account of the interplay between the interpretative activity of the researcher and the participant's account of the experience in his or her own words. The validity of this procedure is extensively discussed elsewhere (see Elliott et al. 1999; Yardley 2000; Eatough and Smith 2008).

Recruitment of participants

In accordance with the principles of IPA (Smith and Osborn 2003), participants were recruited through posters at two prenatal clinics; one in Vilnius (the capital of Lithuania), and one in Bristol, a city of approximately similar size in the South West of the UK. Participants were also drawn from personal contacts (a snowball sampling process). These specific clinics were chosen because of their similar clientele: both are close to the main universities and both ran birth and parenting courses for parents-to-be at that time. All ten women involved in the study responded voluntarily, contacting me after seeing my posters or hearing about my research from their friends. However, two participants cancelled their participation² and two additional volunteers, who responded to the advertisement slightly later, were not accepted, as it felt important to keep the numbers manageable.

Participants

The data in this paper is thus derived from six case studies of women going through the transition to motherhood: Camilla (29-31³, British editor), Saule (33-35, Lithuanian primary school teacher); Vaida (27-29, Lithuanian project consultant), Silva (32-34, UK based artist and project coordinator from New Zealand), Fiona (35-37, USA based assistant professor from the UK), and Eglė (26-28, Lithuania based project coordinator from Latvia)⁴. The names of the women and members of their families have been changed to preserve anonymity. This was the first pregnancy for each of the women in the study, and they were all in stable relationships. All were white, middle class, working and spoke of enjoyment in their professional lives.

Procedure

After an initial telephone conversation with the participants in their first trimester of pregnancy, I invited each of them for a meeting to discuss what the study involved. Written consent was obtained, and the women were given full information about the research. It was made clear that they had the right to withdraw at any time and request their interviews to be

destroyed. Subsequently an interview schedule was developed, and each woman was interviewed twice more (in their second and third trimester) in the same office (in Vilnius or in Bristol appropriately) and then twice more again (just after the baby was born and a year after that) when we met at their homes. So in total each woman was seen five times.

The interviews covered a comprehensive description of their embodied and subjective experiences of pregnancy, of its meaning for the participants, of their experience of the baby within and how they made sense of their lived experience of themselves at that moment. They were also asked about the metaphors or images they associated with their babies, and towards the end of each interview they were asked to sketch themselves and 'a person' of their choice.

Importantly, the questions were used to guide rather than dictate the course of the interview. Participants were treated as experiential experts, and any novel areas of inquiry they opened up were followed. I hoped that the use of the drawings during the interviews would provide me with something 'to hold onto', as well as enable the women to relax more and enhance their deeper bodily self-reflection. It is important to mention that although the drawings themselves sometimes seemed very informative, they were not purposefully used as a psycho-diagnostic tool here. Data collection lasted approximately three years and resulted in more than 30 hours of data, later transcribed to almost 1,000 pages of printed material.

Results

Analysis of the transcripts yielded data covering a wide spectrum of the women's embodied experience during their pregnancy and the postpartum year. These included losing control of their bodies, having fluctuating perceptions of their own body and the baby within, having a need to re-draw and re-own bodily boundaries, experiencing their body both as a 'divide' and as a stranger. However, here I will only present those related to the women's embodied relationship with the baby within.

After the painstaking procedure of reading and re-reading the interview data, eliciting and clustering preliminary themes and going through all the usual steps of IPA (see more about the method in Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009; Eatough and Smith 2008), the phrase 'I have got you under my skin' almost leaped out at me⁵. I realised that this phrase might help me to weave some kind of a meaningful whole out of the diverse threads of themes related to the women's embodied relationship with the baby within (Interestingly just last year Shinebourne (2011) talked about poetry being one way forward in qualitative research).

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In order to present my results in an ordered way here I will use Silva's case as the major illustrative example so one can see the process Silva's went through in more detail. However, I will supplement it with quotations from other women wherever possible. It is important to note that I use Silva's case not because it is significantly different from the other accounts or representative of all pregnant women, on the contrary, it is unique in its own way and therefore helps to open up some specific everyday realities.

First Trimester: 'I'VE GOT you under my skin'

For most of the women interviewed, a central feature of their initial embodied self perception of being pregnant was of having an emphasis on their own condition and the bodily, emotional and social change it involved. Or, if we play with the phrase, the first trimester focuses on the *'I've got'* of the Sinatra song.

Silva, a thirty-two year old project coordinator, originally from New Zealand, married to an Englishman and living in the UK, was in her fifteenth week of pregnancy when we met. She, in answer to my initial question of 'how are you at the moment?', talked at some length about her difficulties at work, problems with informing her boss of her pregnancy and about her lived experience of pregnancy giving her an opportunity to stand up for her rights and wishes in negotiations about her situation at work⁶.

While the experience of pregnancy itself at that point was very much described as a specific condition, having little or hardly anything to do with the baby, Silva told me:

Before then [the first scan at twelve weeks] I knew I was pregnant but I hadn't really⁷ understood that that also meant that I was going to have a baby; I realised I was in a condition but the result really wasn't going into my mind yet. I was too busy trying to concentrate as well as I could / trying to carry on with my life. (Silva, 15 weeks, S1, 224-227).

This was echoed by Camilla, a thirty year old editor from the UK, when she talked about her embodied experience of herself in the early weeks:

[At first]⁸ I just wasn't thinking about a baby as a real person at all, it was just like OK, I am physically pregnant and that means that maybe I'm gonna maybe feel ill [...] it was very much about my physical...me / me being physically different (Camilla, 14 weeks, C1, 256-257).

Although in Silva's case the scan took place only three weeks before the interview, it felt that both Silva and Camilla were talking about themselves as if in the distant past with some, not quite acknowledged, feelings of embarrassment and astonishment. The baby is

called a distant *'result'* and the physical symptoms of nausea, extreme exhaustion and the need to slow down are emphasized.

It seems that women are worried that their pregnancies are challenging their identities in a very embodied way – I am 'horribly tired', 'kept falling asleep in the middle of the afternoon' (Fiona, 10 weeks, F1, 531-532), 'I never thought I could not go down the small elevation [on the sledges] as I am used to' (Saulé, 14 weeks, E1, 261-262) – questioning the way they used to think and feel about themselves:

[My mum says to me] I must basically lie down for the entire nine months. That is not the person I am at all, so there is always that little bit of "am I really looking after myself?" "am I resting enough?" [...] you know part of me wants to start climbing those (*whispering*) mountains again, you know physical mountains and get out and climb trees (*laughs*) (Silva, 15 weeks, S1, 437-442).

In this excerpt it is particularly clear how Silva both resents the extreme change of pregnancy, and feels that it is inevitable. Although it may begin with merely physical change (have to 'lie down for the entire nine months', have to 'really look after myself', have to rest), it appears that it will continue until Silva has transformed completely. 'That is not the person I am at all' says Silva (S1, 438), and with these words it seems she expresses the feeling that a personality change has already taken its own toll and gone beyond her control. I felt this was a very special piece, not only because of *what* was said, but also because of the dramatic *way* in which it was said. Silva began by almost whispering into my ear, as if sharing some major secret, some conspiracy against her mother, some sort of significant nostalgia or deficiency in her own life. In fact she complained quite a lot in our first meeting that her energies were depleted, that she could not continue with her usual artistic activities, her usual walking routines. However, by the end of the extract above, it felt as if she was shouting out her longing to break free, as if someone had taken all control away from her life. The laugh she finished her initial disclosures with felt like a very sad laugh indeed.

Most of the women in the study also talked about the amazing change, the amazing shift, that their image of their baby was having in their minds, even during the very first weeks of their pregnancies. I would argue, however, that in this first period, the description of the baby is very much a product of the mother's own thinking, as well as being closely related to their unconscious attempt to explain their difficult physical condition. For example, 'I started to hate getting dressed [...] it is kind of physically painful [...] I think my baby doesn't like to get dressed already' (Vaida, 11 weeks, V1, 141-144).

In the first interviews, I heard babies being described as aliens or even as dangerous intruders: ‘a clamping bug’, ‘a worm’ (Camilla), ‘a manitou’, ‘an evil spirit’, some sort of ‘growth’ (Silva). Here is an exchange between Silva and myself on this topic:

S: Ah...at the time I felt it was not a succubus / but I really felt there was something feeding off me and I felt a very alien / that was at the beginning,

A: “not a succubus”? Could you explain that, please?

S: A succubus / I can’t remember exactly what it is / not quite the correct / a succubus is an evil spirit [laughs] / that sort of feeds / feeds on your soul when you are asleep [laughs]. So we made it. I don’t feel so negatively towards it...

A: so your baby at the beginning felt as if it is a succubus from ancient mythological times?

S: not quite / it felt more like / there is a science-fiction film called “the Manitou” where somebody has an alien growing inside them and actually give birth out of their shoulder and we referred to it as the “Manitou” when I was first pregnant / because of course I changed my whole outlook on what I wanted to eat / and I would refer to what the baby wanted to eat / it didn’t feel like a baby at all, it felt like a growth (Silva, S1, 15 weeks, 674-689)

Silva seems to be struggling to find the words that adequately reflect her experience and although she is clearly emotionally disturbed by the intrusive character of her baby, as it felt to her at that moment, she is taking great care, it seems, to be as gentle as possible in finding the words for it.

Later ‘baby images’ were much affected by the scan picture or images of foetuses found in medical or parental textbooks. Therefore I heard of babies being the size of ‘a shrimp’ called ‘a shrimp’ (Silva); or being ‘as small as an apple seed, so we call it an apple seed’ (Eglè). Most women, however, from time to time declared that there was just no image of the baby at all yet. ‘I can’t see it yet. Just can’t see it’ says Saule (14 weeks), ‘I didn’t think of that head, legs and arms in there, I can’t...it seems too small [laughs]’ says Camilla (14 weeks).

In general, first scans seemed to be very much treated as a ‘first date’ with the baby and for some of the women it played a transformational role in turning their initial fear of the foetus into love and hope. For example, Silva described this beautifully: ‘when I saw the baby in the scan I remember I felt / I wanted to cry / I wasn’t expecting to fall in love with it and I did’ (Silva, S1, 228-229). However, it is possible that, at this stage and for most women, the scan provides only external, symbolic, evidence of internal life. I would like to argue, then, that it might be due to the fact that, at this early stage, the movements on the screen do not have a direct correspondence in embodied internal activity that they have to be ‘translated’ in order for their significance to truly arise.

There were also some images related to fantasies about the future baby's gender, which seemed related to wishful thinking by the participants themselves or by family members (Camilla, Eglé, Vaida). Let me quote Silva again:

I feel it is she, which is terrible because I want a girl [...] Tim¹⁰ and I both would like it to be a daughter [...] I sort of feel a slight disdain towards male children and I probably will have a boy to teach me to not feel that way (Silva, S1, 647-651).

Interestingly here, just as in talking about the first scan, Silva uses the neuter pronoun 'it'. This particular pronoun 'it' was used much more often across all participants during the first interviews. I wondered if it could reflect a still quite neutral, still not bodily felt relationship women had with their babies at this particular time.

At the end of our first interview Silva drew a picture of herself. In the drawing the external physical signs of pregnancy are hardly visible unless you follow the supportive hand position, which, for me, speaks volumes. Silva seemed really happy with the way her drawing turned out. In quite a few places during the interview she emphasized her wish not to be seen as pregnant yet. So when looking down onto her finished drawing of herself, Silva commented: 'Now I watch myself and think people probably think I have got an upset stomach because I am not really very pregnant, impregnated, engorged' (Silva S1, 876-878).



Silva self portrait S1

Second Trimester: 'I've got you UNDER MY SKIN'

For most of the women I spoke to, the midterm seemed to be coloured by a major struggle to understand their inner (and outer) boundaries – and therefore to establish themselves in relation to another human being within them (the '*under my skin*' of Sinatra's song). Being more precise, we could say that the second trimester is a time when a pregnant woman is playing with a confusing concept, she is seeking to digest whether her baby is actually a part of her or a separate human being. Let me provide you with a few extracts from the interviews:

It's very much you feel [...] I feel he is cuddling me, I feel he is on the outside of me not inside of me, even though my skin is over the two of us. I was walking to work the other day and I felt like a kangaroo with the jerry in the pouch, I feel my stomach is not my stomach any more, it's his stomach that he is living in and its, I have got two separate things, two separate bodies now (Silva, 22 weeks, S2, 815-822).

Interestingly enough, Silva, now 22 weeks pregnant, was not only expressing confusion about her baby's location (by now she has discovered that the baby is a boy), she is also confusing pronouns as if having difficulty in owning the statement 'I feel'.

Later she somehow finds a compromise – 'he is extremely close to me', she construes this as a sign of him seeking closeness: 'It feels like / it feels like it's not necessarily inside of me but he is extremely close to me, and he wants to be with me, he wants to cuddle me' (Silva, S2, 327-329). Later still, Silva declares: 'I feel, you know, that he is actually cuddling me all the time, which I think is a lovely experience' (Silva, S2, 451).

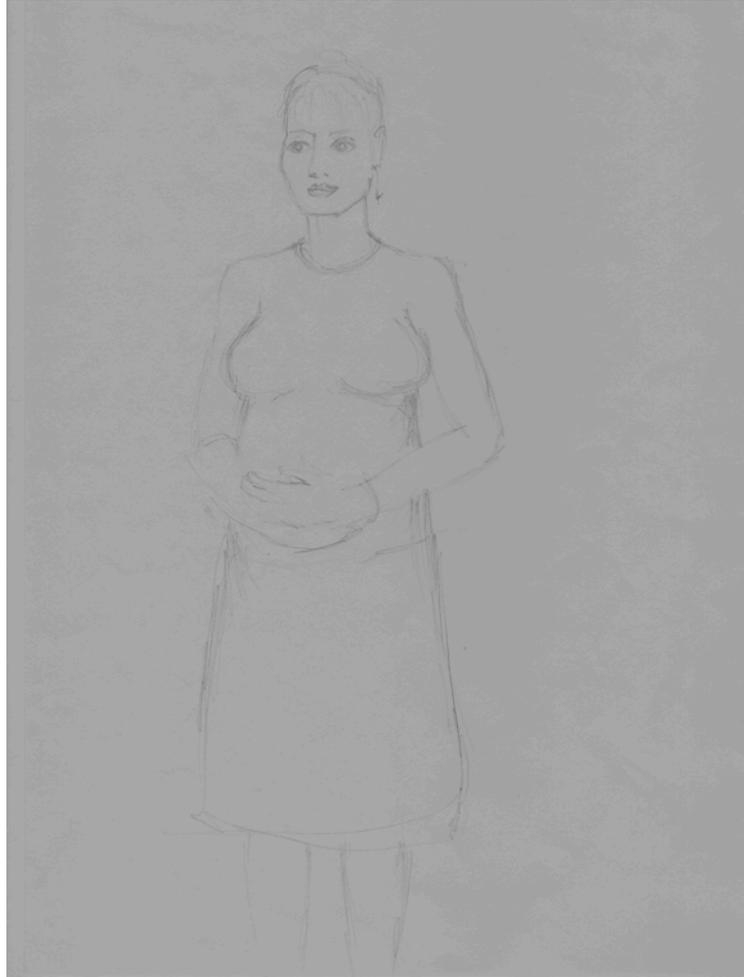
A similar struggle to understand can be found in the accounts of the other women as well: 'It doesn't feel like me now, feels like something else, feels like / yeah / it's not like me getting fat, it's like baby being very / more and more obvious' (Camilla, 27 weeks, C2, 728-731). While Fiona, 35, is struggling with other people's image of her own role as a passive container for the baby. She reasons: 'I do not consider myself a vessel rather we... are [a] team. I like to communicate with Buddy when we are out for a run. I feel as though I am rocking him/her to sleep' (Fiona, 20 weeks, F2, 161-165).

When asked about the image of the baby itself, women in the second trimester seemed to be having a more embodied feeling towards their babies. Mostly it seemed that the women related to their baby's movements as they started to feel them inside themselves. Then, depending on those experiences, they perceived their babies as either being gentle and cuddling them or kicking or swimming. They described the creatures within as either little horses or as 'an elfin creature', 'a woodland spirit' or 'a cuddling bush baby' (Silva, 22 weeks);

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as either ‘swimming like a fish’ or being very solid like ‘an avocado’ (Eglè, 22 weeks). It seems then, that at this stage, metaphors fluctuate depending on a woman’s embodied experience of here and now, as well as from earlier in the pregnancy. So perhaps it is not surprising that this fluctuation is noticeable in Silva’s drawing of herself.



Silva self portrait S2

This self-image of Silva has a much more blurred outline than her previous drawing and her comment illustrates this point even further:

Doesn't look very much like me at all, how strange! That is really strange! Looks like somebody else because I can't really imagine myself straight. Obviously still got my long neck but [...] Strange! I think that / that must be it, I have stopped thinking about myself, which is quite nice (Silva, 22 weeks, S2, 1229-1235).

Weirdly enough, although Silva is declaring that she is somehow losing herself – up to the point where she says that she stopped thinking about herself – she can hardly recognise herself if not for her characteristically, she believes, long neck. Despite this she declares that she is enjoying this change.

The Third Trimester: ‘I’ve got YOU under my skin’

The third time I saw Silva she was 36 weeks pregnant. The major shift was that by this time, Silva, much the same as the other women in the study, now spoke about her baby as an independently experiencing human being: ‘He is turning into a boy as opposed to a baby. That is a very different thing. And now when he gets hiccups / they are Big hiccups!’ (Silva, 36 weeks, S3, 543-547). Another woman – Eglė, a 26 year old Latvian woman in her 38th week, also told me that she felt as if her baby was already out there in the world, that the identity of ‘pregnant’ did not feel right anymore. Interestingly, however, her ‘inner confusion’ was still manifest in the mixture of pronouns she used when talking about her baby (which by now Eglė knew was a girl). As we see here, Eglė sometimes uses ‘she’, and sometimes ‘it’:

It feels like a baby / like it’s a baby. I feel now, women that / say to me ‘nėščia nėščia’ [‘pregnant, pregnant’, in Lithuanian] and I feel like a mom already, you know / there is / it’s really responding to sound, to music, she’s responding to food (*laughs*), I can tickle her feet, I feel like / somehow I feel like [...] mom, already, before you’re actually (Eglė, 38 weeks, Z3, 327-330).

Yet another Lithuanian woman, Vaida, in her 39th week, said: ‘My child feels well: he is kicking; everything is alright for him’ (Vaida, V3, 43-44). It seems here that Vaida attributes happiness to her baby’s movements. However, what is interesting to note in this extract from our interview, is the same confusion which, I feel, expresses itself through the language. From her mid pregnancy Vaida had been telling me that she was going to have a girl. This is what doctors had told her and she even had dreams with her child as a girl; yet she speaks about her child here as ‘he’. This could be accounted for by the fact that, in Lithuanian, the noun ‘child’ is masculine. However, as Vaida initially hoped for a boy, I would argue that it reflects a deeper, ongoing confusion surrounding the gender of her child. This same confusion was expressed openly by Camilla in her third trimester interview: ‘I think it’s a boy just in my (thoughts) / but I wouldn’t say "he", but I think’ (Camilla, 36 weeks, C3, 81-86).

This stage of pregnancy is therefore very much about discovering one’s baby (or ‘You’ from the song) and the joy of actually being able to interact with the baby within, as we see in the following quotations: ‘It’s become my little androgynous friend. Buddy has neither age nor gender but definite likes and dislikes’ (Fiona, 33 weeks, F3, 75-76); ‘While he moves about, we have a little / we have fun together’ (Silva, 36 weeks S3, 234-235). When talking about the baby himself / herself at this stage, most of the women seemed to express a great deal of empathy and identification with him/her as an independently experiencing being:

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hope he ‘is comfortable / not too squashed up / in there’; hope ‘his experience is pleasant and happy’; think about him as ‘this mischievous troll-like creature’ (Silva’s, 36 weeks). Most of the women imagine their babies-to-be already with a name, a certain gender and character (Eglè, Vaida, Camilla, Saulè). Perhaps this could also be related to the perception of the reality of the babies being close to term and thus now being able to survive were they to be born prematurely.

In the last drawing of herself as a pregnant woman, Silva drew herself for the first time, without her usual elaborate hair style, but instead as a person content with herself, looking downwards, with her hair falling freely, as we see here:



Silva self portrait S3

These were her comments:

I’ve realised I’ve spent a lot of time... concentrating... this is where I am at the moment [...] It is all about feeling, holding on, being relaxed, shoulders down, this is where I want to be, spend my days – sitting there (*laughs*) quite contentedly, thanks (S3, 36 weeks, 662- 670)

Once the Baby is Born: The meeting

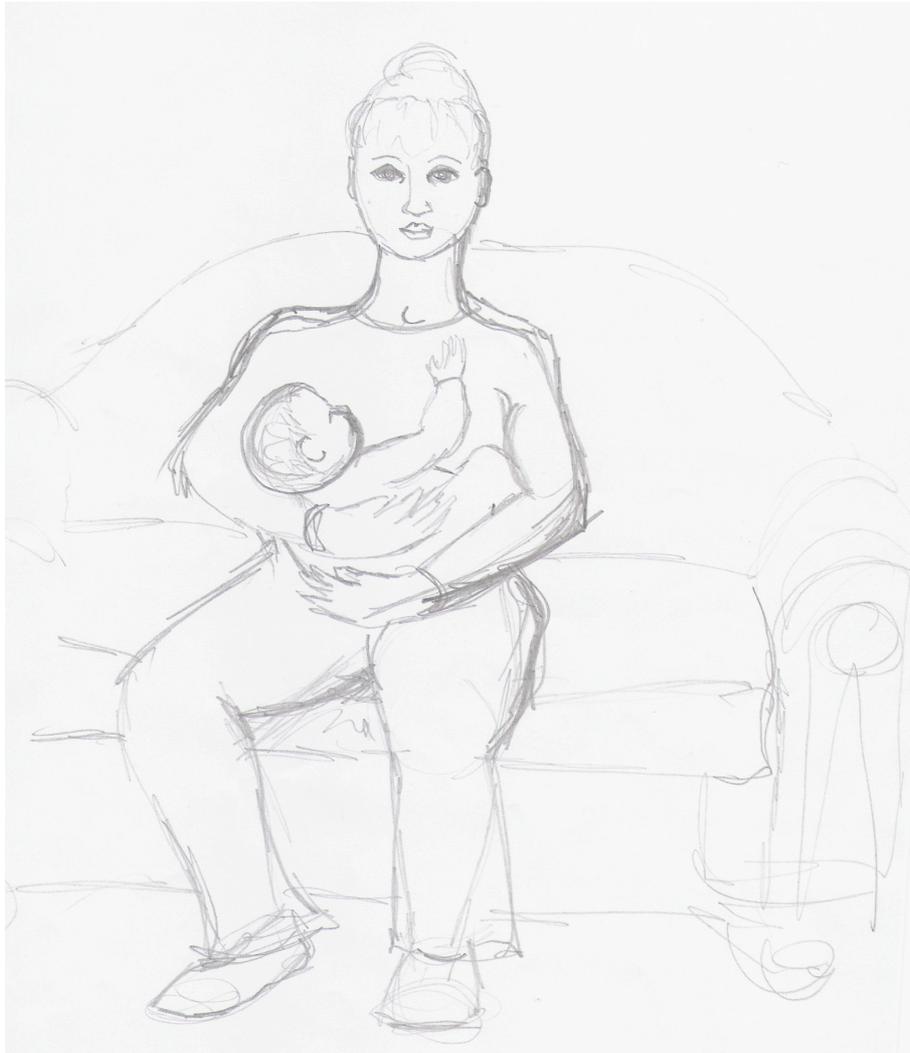
The fourth interviews had a totally different feel to them. The babies were born and it was the first time I saw the women (and their babies) in their own homes.. Fiona, 36 years old by then, talked with her 11 week old son sleeping peacefully by her side:

She brought him to me and I lay him on my breast. Instantly he started to root and within seconds he had found my nipple and started to suck. What an

incredible feeling! I forgot all the pain and indignity of the last few hours, being more precise – nineteen something hours and just melted into this warm, little pixie-like ball. He was beautiful and I felt beautiful too [...] A silence, almost reverence settled over the room and I fell in love with the two beautiful boys in my life (Fiona, F4, 247-253).

In a similar way, Silva, 33, with her son, 14 weeks, confides that despite the unnerving experience of the birth, she now feels ‘absolutely elated’ (S4, 2076). The way she talks about herself while drawing a self-portrait, stands in sharp contrast to the description of herself as a woman quite conscious of her own appearance that she provided in the first months of her pregnancy:

[to draw] myself?...no idea...really weird...A bit of liner...Oh, my God, I think I better have baby in my arms, don't I? Hello, hello you little one [to her son]...I have got lovely strong arms...lovely strong legs...Strength is just amazing to me. Returning into your body as well as into your mind...What a robust looking body! (Silva, her baby son 14 weeks old, S4, 2052 -2061).



Silva self portrait S4

Motherhood: A Year Later

I saw Silva for the last time when her son, Marcie¹¹ was 13 months old. The largest part of our interview was taken up by her describing the amazing boy her son was turning into:

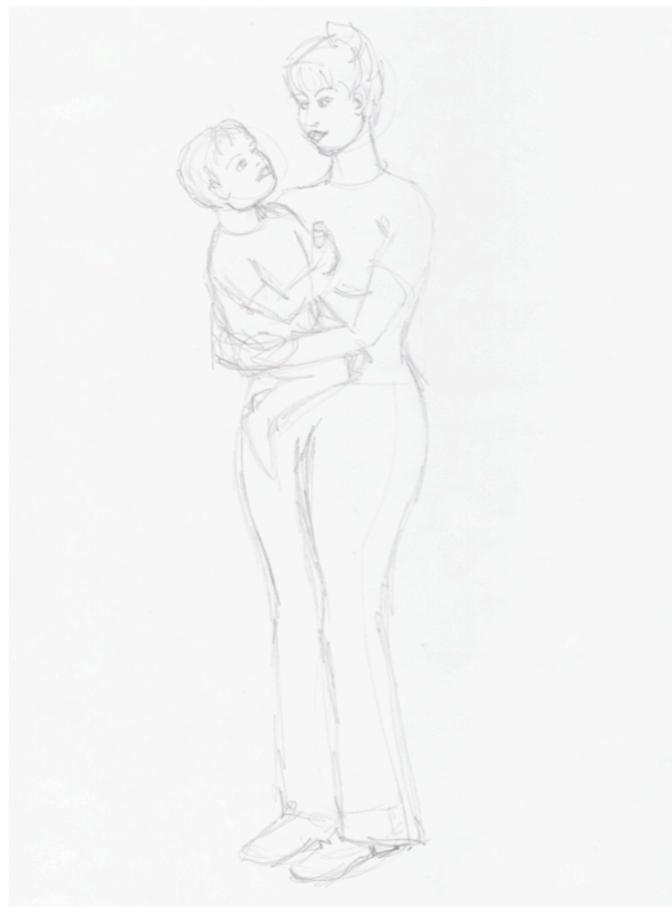
A: I noticed that you have quickly moved away from your body experience back to Marcie [her baby] again. Have you said everything you wanted to say about your reaction to your own bodily changes?

S: yeah, I don't mind any of them. I don't care (laughs) I really don't care. I think I am attractive enough. And I don't really look at myself. I do have moments when I think I am just going to glam myself up and I do it. And I think, good girl, you can still do it (Silva, 34, S5, 301-309).

It is almost as if Silva was slightly irritated by my invitation to turn away from the much more 'appropriate' subject of her interest – her child. Later she adds:

You know – it is just hilarious! That the modern expectation of the woman is that she is not allowed to settle down once she's had her child / and just settle down in the bosom of her own family, she's expected to be very much the same as before (Silva, S5, 607-611).

Her self-portrait, I think, reflects her change very clearly:



Silva self portrait S5

However, in her last interview Fiona, by contrast, seemed to be worried, blaming herself for the different embodied experience of her post-pregnancy, post-birth state in which she found herself:

I pee when I run. Should have done my Kegels! I am unfit and so exercise is slow-going. This body once ran two marathons in six months (laughs) and now I struggle to run three miles. I have a very low libido too (sighs)" (Fiona, 37, her son Daniel¹² 19 months old, F5, 59-63).

However, Fiona is also amazed by her own obvious change and comments:

I have become "Daniel's Mum" and call Steve¹³ "Daddy" and I don't even mind. When Daniel says "Ma-ma" in his quizzical way I just melt. To think, a year and half ago I would have bitten someone's head off who had tried calling me "Mama." (Fiona, F5, 236-241)

Discussion¹⁴

The maternal transformation, as it is reflected in the way women talk about themselves in different stages of their pregnancy and early motherhood, could be described as the development, or progress, of a slowly changing emphasis, although unavoidably overlapping, from self to baby. To be more specific, analysis of the interviews has shown some of the possible directions that embodied experiences of the transformation due to maternity can take:

- a) The process begins with an emphasis on the woman herself being in a specific condition; being tired, worried about her work and mostly scared of an uncanny 'it' (the foetus) in the first trimester.
- b) We then see the beginnings of an embodied relationship, which escapes language and reflects itself in the challenging sensation of the baby moving independently inside the woman. The baby simultaneously feels 'outside, yet inside' of the woman; images of cuddles and of rocking to sleep often came to the minds of the women in the mid-term.
- c) Next an ambivalent and confusing tension plays out between fantasies of having fun, tickling and playing with the expected child and experiences of empathy regarding the baby's lack of space and comfort towards the end of the pregnancy.
- d) Birth signals the meeting with, and being overwhelmed by, a new person.
- e) Lastly, the creation of a time limited self-sufficient container.

The idea of a major transformation appears to be congruent with the psychoanalytic idea that there is a felt difference between the pre-birth and post-birth 'mental state' of a woman (Stern 1995; Raphael-Leff 2009; Pines 1993). '[A] first pregnancy, a move from

childlessness towards parenthood, is a time of emotional and psychological upheaval' (Pines 1993, p.117) and 'a valuable time of emotional preparation for motherhood' (p.118). These ideas help to illuminate and expand upon the understanding of some of the subjectively important particularities involved. For example, Stern's statement (1995, p.171) that: 'with the birth of a baby, especially the first, the mother passes into a new and unique psychic organisation' – 'the motherhood constellation' – expresses itself in a process of realignment. This process refocuses the woman's interests and concerns such that she concentrates 'more on growth and development and less on her career; more on her husband-as-father-and-context-for-her-and-the-baby and less on her husband-as-man-and-sexual-partner; more upon her baby and less upon almost everything else' (p.172). In my study, I could clearly see the beginnings of this new 'psychic organisation' presenting itself in the middle of pregnancy and, for some, as early as the first months, generally after (or even – during) the first scan.

The first scan, incidentally, although perceived as quite clinical and invasive by some, was, for most of the women in the study, as important as a 'first date' with the baby. This is congruous with Bondas and Eriksson's (2001, p.832) statement that the first scan has an important role as 'an experience of communion'.

Nevertheless, none of our participant's stories were clear-cut or linear. It seems that women's fantasies and their embodied experiences are in a state of flux throughout pregnancy and in early motherhood. Hence I agree with Smith (1999, p.424) that phenomenological research comes in as a useful tool here, as: 'It enables us to see and illuminate some patterns across case studies while still recognising the particularities of the individual lives from which those patterns emerge'.

Talking about women's fantasies and, specifically, in making sense of particular images that women used to describe the presence of their foetus inside, it is important to understand that initially, in the early stages, before any external physical evidence, it is virtually impossible to feel the baby in any embodied way. Therefore, looking at my results, I could say that at this time of intangibility, women find it important to be able to conceive of the foetus as having an identity. In this, my results are in principal agreement with Smith's (1991), Raphael-Leff's (1995) and Bailey's (2001) proposals. Smith (1991, p.230) describes a situation in the early stages of pregnancy where, from the standpoint of the woman's subjective experience, the foetus may have 'an uncertain person status' and, therefore, as demonstrated in our study; the woman may employ a number of tactics to attempt to make some sense of the situation. As we have seen in the cases detailed here a variety of tactics were used:

1) imagination, for example, remembering a film character; 2) drawing from available external information for the baby's present size and form; 3) using nicknames; 4) postulating about the future; for example, will it be a boy or a girl?

Raphael-Leff (1995), although being relativistic about dividing women into subgroups herself, proposes that some expectant women 'experience the baby as a benign presence, others treat it as a parasitic invader' (1995, p.65). This statement is only partly in tune with the findings of the thirty interviews I conducted with the women in this study, as each of them, and in almost every single interview, talked to me about their experiences of their baby-to-be as being simultaneously on both sides of this contraposition. It therefore seems that there is an ongoing fluidity within this experience, although it is generally more positive towards the end of pregnancy. Even those who took what seemed to be a very welcoming stance towards their babies from very early on still, occasionally, described their babies to me as someone non-human, alien, strange or inanimate. This, however, might be due to the fact that the women in my sample were quite a homogenous group; being rather academic, mostly quite reflective, open and, at times, critical about their own experience.

Overall, there was a clear embodied dimension to the women's accounts. In contrast to Gil-Rodriguez (2008), all participants talked not only about their changing body image or 'the objective body' per se, but also, as they became more used to me, about their embodied experience, or rather 'the lived body' experience (see Merleau-Ponty 1945/2006; Van Manen 1998). Drawing, even if difficult for some at first, paradoxically relaxed the women even more, enabling the voicing of pre-reflected nuances (see Gendlin 1996) and opening up some of the 'pre-separated multiplicity' of embodied feelings (see Todres 2007).

Finally, the mothers-to-be, consistently replaced pronouns when talking about their unborn babies¹⁵. I have already suggested, this confusion might be a reflection of their ambivalence towards pregnancy. Yet, despite these supposedly linguistic mistakes and ambivalence, a very real sense of the empowering dimension of motherhood also prevails.

It is very clear that, even though these women have lost something (their former autonomous selves, their usual particular physical abilities and looks) they are also moving towards something new. A new connectedness, a new personal relationship, a new embodied meaning-making and a new kind of freedom: a freedom from the dominant social discourse regarding women's bodies and appearance in today's society (this was especially clear from the postnatal interviews). This finding is also in agreement with Gilligan (1982), Young (1984), Radley (2000), Jordan et al (2005) and Gil-Rodriguez (2008). There is a sense,

therefore, that despite negating their former sense of their embodied self and life world, and despite the women feeling that they may have changed irreversibly in appearance, pregnancy and the transition to motherhood was still experienced as a hugely rewarding experience, if only for a while.

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¹ In his last, most radical work ‘The Visible and the Invisible’, Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968) replaces Martin Heidegger’s famous phrase ‘Being-in-the-World’ with ‘Flesh-of-the-World’, in an attempt to bring philosophy ‘down to earth’ and capture our embodied way of being.

² One woman felt she was not prepared to discuss her emotions and decided to stop after the first interview. The second woman who withdrew from the study called me after two interviews saying that she would like to discontinue her participation due to changes in her family situation

³ The two ages correspond to the age of the women during our first and the last (fifth) interview

⁴ This was a purposefully multicultural sample, and although cultural specificity is a significant factor in the experience of pregnancy, as I have discussed in a different paper (see Matulaite 2011), here I am looking at what my participants have in common regarding their ‘embodied relationship with the babies within’ despite their differences.

⁵ This is the title of the famous, or even signature, song of Frank Sinatra

⁶ This emphasis on their personal work situation being solved in some way (Vaida, Silva) or complicated (Camilla, Fiona, Eglè, Saule) by the pregnancy is visible throughout all first interviews.

⁷ Words underlined were being said with a greater emphasis

⁸ Words in such brackets are my explanations

⁹ Such brackets indicate editorial omission. Such material has been omitted purely for reasons of space and is not relevant to the themes of the paper

¹⁰ Her husband, a pseudonym

¹¹ Pseudonym

¹² Pseudonym

¹³ Pseudonym

¹⁴ My reflections on other accounts of pregnant embodiment in the literature will be necessarily short, in keeping with retaining a focus on the detailed description of my participants’ experiences.

¹⁵ The usage of pronouns to depersonalize and distance was also noticed by Gil-Rodriguez (2008, p.87) in her research

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