Feeling Alien: Postpartum Depression and Loss of Identity

Postpartum depression (PPD) is frequently characterized by a loss of one's former sense of self and feelings of being a 'bad mom'. The birth of a child is considered a major life event that evokes an identity shift. This process, however, becomes problematic when new mothers feel unable to consolidate new identities matching their lived experiences of motherhood (Fusar-Poli et al. 2025, 34). I argue that the internalization of dominant discourses on 'good motherhood' inhibits new mothers' identity consolidation through disciplinary mechanisms of shame and guilt. This increases the risk of self-alienation and may render them more vulnerable to PPD. Disciplinary norms of 'good motherhood' construct mothers as selfless and nurturing. They instill in new mothers unable to meet these expectations a sense of deficiency. Drawing on a phenomenology of shame and guilt, I argue that they may feel inhibited to consolidate new identities matching their experiences. Lacking the acceptable hermeneutical resources to overcome such inhibitions, new mothers suffer from a hermeneutical injustice. This exacerbates feelings of self-alienation and renders them more vulnerable to PPD. I, therefore, suggest the potential therapeutic benefit of 'support groups', which provide new mothers with peer support and recognition (Dennis et al. 2006, 327).