

Do Maternal/Paternal Instincts Increase With Age?

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## Introduction

Can maternal instincts vary with age? What about paternal instincts? And if they do, does it matter whether an individual has had a child or a child-like figure in their life? Or is this something that naturally develops regardless? Vocabulary.com defines maternal instincts as “A woman's desire to have a child; care for other people in a nurturing way, even without being a mother”. Many studies have been conducted to test the various aspects of the maternal/paternal instincts, such as its validity as a true instinct, its strength, societal changes and impacts, and the like. By understanding the truth to maternal instinct in humans, we learn important information about human development and behavior, even just how it differentiates us from other species, if it does at all. In a study performed by the Department of Nursing for the University of St. Joseph, researchers aimed to see how much American women try to juggle both careers and motherhood, and if these opinions changed after having a child (Morgan-Meller, 2015). With this information, scientists can then go on to ask if maternal instinct grows over the course of a woman’s life whether a child is present or not. In a similar article written by Cherine Habib and Sandra Lancaster, researchers explore the change across a first pregnancy in the emergence of the father status as well as its relationship with paternal foetal attachment, in this case analyzing paternal instinct (Habib-Lancaster, 2010). Does this attachment grow as the fetus grows from fetus to infant, and how does this carry over for the rest of the child’s life? To continue on this trail of thought, some studies have shown that in recent years, there is an increase in fathers being more involved in parenting (Barbeta-Viñas, Marc and Cano, Tomás 2017). This could be based off of societal changes, and if so, perhaps there is a link between the change over time in paternal instincts in a man’s lifetime. In another paper, there are a few issues that have an impact on

pregnant adolescents, which are discussed in full, and lead to the point that for a successful motherhood for both mother and child, certain factors must be in place in order to provide a safe and stable maternal attachment to the infant (Turnage-Pharris, 2013). In this way, scientists can learn the impact that such maternal instinct and attachment have on a healthy mother-child relationship, and examine how that relationship grows and thrives, even in less-than-ideal situations. Lastly, we will look at *Are Women Naturally Good Mothers?*, an article which focuses on the work of three naturalists (Fabre, Perrier, and Giard), describing how these researchers either built, reinforced, or protested the feminine norms of the time, and argued that “maternal instinct” was not as natural as society thought, but instead, a piece of agenda, pushed by society to reflect the gender roles or political correctness of the era (Thomas, 2014).

### **Literature Review**

In a study done by the Department of Nursing for the University of St. Joseph, researchers aimed to see how much American women try to juggle both careers and motherhood. They argued that the opinions and habits of midlife mothers concerning work and motherhood are important to investigate, especially because birth rates for older women are on the rise in the United States as well as other developed countries such as Canada and the United Kingdom (Morgan-Meller, 2015). To truly delve into the topic, they interviewed thirteen first-time mid-life mothers their opinions on motherhood and careers. A purposive sample of 13 women aged 45-56 years old participated in the two in-depth interviews, and what they found was that a paradox emerged in which the realities of motherhood was not how the women had envisioned it would be. (Morgan-Meller, 2015). They were surprised by the level of commitment they felt towards their child and voiced strong ideals about how to do mothering “the right way” which included, but was not limited to, making changes to work schedules in order to be more present and available for their child (Morgan-Meller, 2015). Researchers concluded that healthcare professionals should be aware of these specific issues that exist for older first-time mothers like adjusting to work (Morgan-Meller, 2015). This in mind, there may be a correlation between maternal instincts increasing and the presence of a child at all. For instance, would the women in this study still have such strong calls to motherhood, even if they decided not to have any children, and to make their careers their lives?

Another article written by Cherine Habib and Sandra Lancaster explores change across a first pregnancy in the emergence of the father status and its relationship with paternal foetal attachment, that bond a father feels with his unborn child. This is a bond that is rarely studied in

comparison to the maternal foetal attachment, but recent work is showing that fathers can grow through a change in emotional attachment and priorities, just the same as mothers. A sample of seventy-eight first-time fathers in Australia completed a self-evaluation survey concerning their identities as fathers as well as the paternal antenatal attachment scale at both the first trimester and then again at the third trimester (Habib-Lancaster, 2010). Results showed that there were no changes in the identity measures, nor were there significant changes in attachment between the first and third trimesters (Habib-Lancaster, 2010). However, it was found that paternal foetal attachment significantly increased with the imminent birth. This information supported the idea that paternal foetal attachment could be predicted by father identity through the negative regression, while also discovering where paternal “instincts” or attachment typically begin to take place and strengthen, leading back to the idea that maternal and paternal instincts may tend to increase over time (Habib-Lancaster, 2010).

To continue off of this idea, quantitative studies have shown that in recent years, there has been an increase in fathers being more involved in parenting (Barbeta-Viñas, Marc and Cano, Tomás 2017). Several changes in society have been granted credit for this proposed movement, specifically in Spanish society, where these societal shifts have led to all new ideas about the traditional model of fatherhood. Researchers found discourses of Spanish fathers concerning fatherly involvement, identifying what they believe “paternal involvement” to be, as well as its changing tendencies (Barbeta-Viñas, Marc and Cano, Tomás 2017), leading to a new definition of modern fatherhood and paternal involvement. There were eight focus groups observed in Barcelona and Madrid, where the sample design as well as the composition of the groups were directed to collect information on the meaning given to “fatherhood” *by* fathers

from various social positions (Barbeta-Viñas, Marc and Cano, Tomás 2017). They took the main variables such as employment status and education levels, and made a scatterplot on an axis, showing how the variables relate to four aspects of an X and Y spectrum; Routinary vs Socio-Cultural, and Instrumental vs. Expressive (Barbeta-Viñas, Marc and Cano, Tomás 2017). Among the main findings, it was emphasized that the transition of fatherhood is leading to the traditional homogeneous fatherhood changing and molding towards a more complex, dynamic, and multidimensional person, one who is more involved with the maternal figure when it comes to rearing a child (Barbeta-Viñas, Marc and Cano, Tomás 2017). One of the relevant theories for the study of fathers' involvement is the social construction of gender (West and Zimmerman, 1987). This is a complex process of socially developed perceptions, interactions and micropolitical activities that create a particular vision of what is masculine and feminine, much like the Barbeta-Viñas study. Again, this study may correlate to the idea that paternal instincts may increase with age, as well as changing over time concerning a historical timeline, not just the individual's experience. Although the two ideas are different, they could go hand in hand with one another, and shape society to allow men to be more at ease with "paternal instincts" and the ideals that come with fatherhood.

In another paper, three issues that have an impact on pregnant adolescents (young girls who are ages nineteen and below) are discussed in detail; Education, Identity development, and Maternal Support (Turnage-Pharris, 2013). In this paper, *Supporting the Pregnant Adolescent*, the authors pay particularly close attention to one of the issues impacting pregnant adolescents, which is completing high school, and helping her navigate the identity development process (Turnage-Pharris, 2013). The final factor discussed in detail is the pregnant adolescent's

relationship with her mother/maternal support (Turnage-Pharris, 2013). Helping the adolescent to transition into her role as mother is aided when material is presented in a format she can understand, and she has the support of her mother or maternal figure (Turnage-Pharris, 2013). This is becoming a largely discussed topic in American society today as we move towards being a more tolerant country, and seeing that these types of occurrences happen often in our daily lives. In order to provide a happy and healthier lifestyle for both the mother and the infant, it is important to encourage the adolescent both academically and in finding her new identity in her current role (Turnage-Pharris, 2013). Both of these factors together then affect how she will interpret the new maternal “instincts” she begins to feel towards the infant, largely due also to having a supportive maternal role model. The presence of all three of these factors could aid in proper growth of such “maternal instincts”, both during this challenging time, as well as throughout the adolescent’s life (Turnage-Pharris, 2013). With this in mind, the same reasoning could be applied to all mothers as well, and not simply adolescents.

*Are Women Naturally Devoted Mothers?* This paper analyzes a few debates which took place concerning maternal instinct in 19th century France under the Third Republic, and was written by Marion Thomas in 2014. It focuses on the work of three naturalists (Fabre, Perrier, and Giard), explaining in detail how these scientists either constructed, strengthened, or rivaled the then-feminine identities and debated the notion that “maternal instinct” is not as natural as society claims, but rather, something which has been pushed by society to reflect the gender roles or political agenda of the time (Thomas, 2014). The discussion about maternal instinct relates back to more general concerns both to the definition of female and male nature, and to the interpretation of sexual differences (Thomas, 2014). In the work of Fabre, Perrier, and Giard,

although their theories were all vastly contrasting, they all were linked heavily to political agenda and the idea of “maternal instinct”, with varying opinions on how these related to whatever dominant social culture there was (Thomas, 2014). For instance, Perrier utilized the animal kingdom in order to justify his view of women’s essentially maternal character, that because humans are animals, we may have the same instincts to raise children, and protect them with the same care and devotion that a lioness would have with her cubs, thus strengthening the optimal idea of the average Republican woman in France at the time (Thomas, 2014). Fabre and Giard, on the other hand, were more at ease with the idea of women’s emancipation from motherhood and a traditional lifestyle, and felt that their outspoken views that were at unpopular and unbecoming with the dominant ideology of their time (Thomas, 2014). Fabre attacked the myth of the “devoted mother”, showing that even within the same species, one could find classic behaviors associated with maternal instinct as well as the opposite end of the spectrum, such as devouring offspring (Thomas, 2014). Giard emphasized the egoistic origin of this so-called “motherly love”, even calling out the image of this “perfect, motherly woman” which had been praised, adorned, and advertised by the Republicans (Thomas, 2014). In short, in *Are Women Naturally Devoted Mothers?*, Marion Thomas concludes that maternal instinct is not necessarily a myth persay, but rather a biological reality, even if it is complicated, moldable, and not “one size fits all”. Then the question of whether motherly love is an instinct or a socially acquired behavior remains a matter of discussion to this day (Thomas, 2014). By applying this article then, the idea that maternal or paternal instincts can increase over time is very difficult to measure, as not everyone expresses this “instinct” the same, and its validity is still a matter of questioning.



## Critical Review

### 1. Morgan-Meller, 2015

#### ***Who funded this research?***

Funding was obtained from Swansea University, The University of New England, and Sigma Theta Tau Chapter-at-large Kappa Zeta.

#### ***What do the authors want you to accept as “fact”?***

One thing that was stated during their introduction was that “The first expectation for appropriate child rearing is that mothers are still considered to be the primary caregivers for children and when the mother is not available, others serve as substitutes.” I believe this to be pure conjecture, as it was never cited nor elaborated upon by any means, let alone proven fact.

#### ***Did the authors appear to have a bias before conducting the study?***

No bias was detected, and the authors also declared no conflict of interest.

#### ***Did the authors provide the data they developed? If so, did they provide an analysis?***

This was a qualitative study based on the philosophy of hermeneutic phenomenology, and all data used for interpretation was their own. They did analyze their findings, which can be seen in Section 3.2, and interpreted throughout Section 4.

#### ***Did they critique their own work?***

Yes. The authors mentioned that they have provided “sufficient information” related to the participants experiences around work and career adjustments without compromising their identity, to enable the reader to judge whether the findings are transferable to them in a similar situation or at least be recognizable to someone who is a midlife mother, and ways to improve studies like this in the future.

***Did the authors use other research to support their findings? If so, did they critique the data or work(s) of others that they used?***

Yes, other data was included, and yes these studies and articles were analyzed. This took place in the Introduction as well as the Conclusion, and the authors even recommended other reading material to the reader in order to better grasp the concepts discussed.

***Are any of their findings “opinion”; or unsupported by their data and/or the work of others?***

One aspect of this study was interviews with the test subjects and the researchers, which I think always leaves room for opinions to taint the data. With an actual person interviewing a participant, it brings in an element that could sway the participants answers which would not happen if you used a questionnaire or the like. The authors even state that “it allowed time to develop a relationship and ‘rapport’ with the women”. I believe this opinion may have actually tampered with results.

***What else could they do to improve the support for their findings?***

Future studies could be aimed at the work adjustments that these women make after motherhood to determine if this creates balance in their lives, and also included women who adopted children into the study. I also believe the sample could have been larger, and therefore, more diverse. As a whole, this source was objectively comparing, analyzing, and synthesizing their information coherently and in a way that properly represents my own topic as discussed in the current literature.

2. Habib-Lancaster, 2010

***Who funded this research?***

This project was funded Deakin University (Department of Psychology) Geelong, Australia as well as Victoria University (Department of Psychology) St. Albans, Australia.

***What do the authors want you to accept as “fact”?***

While there are many things the author wants you to accept as fact, such as the lack of information available concerning paternal instincts over the course of a pregnancy, the author backs up every statement with evidence as to why it has been stated.

***Did the authors appear to have a bias before conducting the study?***

I really felt that everything in the article was fair and justified, and never really felt that the author was pushing one idea over another. However, I suppose it is important to note that the author never declared there not being any conflicts of interest.

***Did the authors provide the data they developed? If so, did they provide an analysis?***

Yes, all the data provided was from their own study, and all outside sources were referenced and cited. The data was organized into a variety of charts and graphs to show the different factors and ways in which it could be interpreted.

***Did they critique their own work?***

Yes. They stated that the study suffered with sampling bias, particularly in respect to the participants' socio-economic status as generally indicated by their occupational category and high level of education. This is not atypical of studies where random selection is not possible and participants have self-selected, but still.

***Did the authors use other research to support their findings? If so, did they critique the data or work(s) of others that they used?***

Yes, other data was included, and these studies/articles were analyzed. This took place in the Introduction as well as the Analysis for reference and in the Conclusion too, and the authors even recommended other reading material to the reader in order to better grasp the concepts discussed.

***Are any of their findings “opinion”; or unsupported by their data and/or the work of others?***

Not that it is anything to be concerned with - the only opinion-based conclusion I found was in the final sentence, which states that the study was important for future studies because of the sample based they used, but one could argue that they should have expanded the sample just a bit more.

***What else could they do to improve the support for their findings?***

Future research may endeavour to sample from more diverse communities (e.g. a cross-section of multiple hospital regions). Still, I felt that this was an important source that was objectively comparing, analyzing, and synthesizing their information coherently and in a way that properly represents my own topic as discussed in the current literature.

3. Barbeta-Viñas, Marc and Cano, Tomás 2017

***Who funded this research?***

This study was supported by the project “La implicación paterna en el cuidado de los hijos en España” [Fathers’ involvement in the care of children in Spain] (CSO2012-33476) directed by Lluís Flaquer, and the FPI Program (BES-2013-066777), funded by the sub-programme for Non-Oriented Fundamental Research Projects within the framework of the VI National Plan for Scientific Research, Development and Technological Innovation 2008-2011 of the Ministry of Economy, Industry and Competitiveness.

***What do the authors want you to accept as “fact”?***

Very early on, the authors establish their definitive reasoning for the purpose of the article, which is that “[we] cannot understand fatherhood today without looking at it in relation to the construction of hegemonic masculinity and the process of individualisation”.

***Did the authors appear to have a bias before conducting the study?***

While I did not detect any apparent bias, it is important to note that the authors did not disclose a statement stating their lack of conflicts of interest, neither in the English or the Spanish transcript.

***Did the authors provide the data they developed? If so, did they provide an analysis?***

Yes, and no. While they provided a lot of data through interviews, they also used data from outside sources as reference, but was sure to cite each one properly in the References Section.

Analysis was provided on all accounts.

***Did they critique their own work?***

Actually, no, they did not. They explained why it was important, and valuable, but did not state things that limited their research, nor did they make suggestions for further improvement.

***Did the authors use other research to support their findings? If so, did they critique the data or work(s) of others that they used?***

While they did cite the sources of the other articles and studies that were used to justify their data, they really did very little critiquing of other sources as well as their own. The reader was just expected to take everything as fact.

***Are any of their findings “opinion”; or unsupported by their data and/or the work of others?***

Yes, a lot of their data is. This study stretched their data in order to fit what I am sure must have been their motive to begin, and much of their conclusions was pure conjecture.

***What else could they do to improve the support for their findings?***

I believe it should have been established what the different levels of fathering are, as everyone has different definitions, rather than allowing participants to decide if they were being an “involved” parent or not. Being “involved” can mean to very different things depending on parenting style and circumstance. Looking back, I am a bit wary about selecting this source, though it was peer-reviewed. I would still say they synthesized their information coherently and in a way that properly represents my own topic as discussed in the current literature.

4. Turnage-Pharris, 2013

***Who funded this research?***

This research was funded by ICEA, the International Childbirth Education Association.

***What do the authors want you to accept as “fact”?***

In the abstract, the authors state that three issues that have an impact on pregnant adolescents (young girls who are ages nineteen and below), which are education, identity development, and maternal support. However, the authors do go into why they state this to be true, and back it with the data obtained by their research.

***Did the authors appear to have a bias before conducting the study?***

Although I do not see an impure motive or slant in the article, I think there may be a slight bias only because it was very difficult to find who funded the article, the author did not disclose a lack of a conflict of interest, and there was even a coupon on the last page of the article to complete some training for the ICEA, who funded the project.

***Did the authors provide the data they developed? If so, did they provide an analysis?***

Actually, the author did not provide the data they used, but rather borrowed from other sources such as articles and studies, being sure to cite all of them and include them in the References section in MLA format.

***Did they critique their own work?***

Yes, they included that although these three factors greatly affect the health of both mother and infant, there are always of course, many other circumstances that cannot be known or made universal, such as the relationship with the father, religious affiliations, etc.

***Did the authors use other research to support their findings? If so, did they critique the data or work(s) of others that they used?***

Yes, they included research from other studies done, such as a similar study done on how adolescent fathers feel, needing to become a supportive father-figure at such a young age. They analyzed this source as well as others, stating their flaws and how they could improve, as well as citing them properly.

***Are any of their findings “opinion”; or unsupported by their data and/or the work of others?***

No, I think the statements they made were appropriate to the data they gathered. They did not come to any grandiose conclusions that stretched their data, but rather, made small interpretations of their modest work, therefore preventing any discrediting to the article and avoiding opinion-based findings.

***What else could they do to improve the support for their findings?***

I felt that the article could have been made more scientific by better organization of data, for instance, stating very clearly who funded the operation. Still, I felt that this was an important source that was objectively comparing, analyzing, and synthesizing their information coherently and in a way that properly represents my own topic as discussed in the current literature.



5. Thomas, 2014***Who funded this research?***

This research was funded by the Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences for Wiley Periodicals.

***What do the authors want you to accept as “fact”?***

There are several blunt sentences and ideas that the author does not always elaborate on throughout the literature, such as “As such, naturalization simply refers to importations from nature to society”, which could be discussed to further extent.

***Did the authors appear to have a bias before conducting the study?***

I was not able to detect any kind of bias, and the author did declare no conflicts of interest. There was no marketing done at any point throughout the article, and I felt the information and its following interpretation were not skewed or stretched in any way.

***Did the authors provide the data they developed? If so, did they provide an analysis?***

No, the author did not provide *original* data, but they did provide the data of the three works focused upon, as well as the analysis at their time, an interpretation in today’s world by himself, as well as an interpretation in today’s world done by the helpful criticisms and suggestions received from a number of people whilst the article was in various draft forms, such as Charlotte Sleight, Anne Epstein, Chris Herzfeld, and Thierry Hoquet.

***Did they critique their own work?***

Although there was no new data put forth by the author, he does examine the way he organized the data and pointed out some of its limitations, including the era of the studies he chose to

examine (they being from a number of decades back) and how this translates to our society today.

***Did the authors use other research to support their findings? If so, did they critique the data or work(s) of others that they used?***

Yes. The entire article covers the work of three major studies conducted by three naturalists (Fabre, Perrier, and Giard), explaining in detail how these scientists either constructed, strengthened, or rivaled the then-feminine identities and debated the notion that “maternal instinct” is not as natural as society claims, but rather, something which has been pushed by society to reflect the gender roles or political agenda of the time. He discusses each idea greatly, including the flaws.

***Are any of their findings “opinion”; or unsupported by their data and/or the work of others?***

There are several points throughout the article where the author “breaks the fourth wall” so to speak, and interjects with his own commentary, which I suppose is allowed, but it deters from the factual, which is always a concern. An example can be seen on page four, where he asks the reader, “(didn’t Joan of Arc have a male body? How can one achieve the ideal embodied by Mary of being both a virgin and a mother?)”

***What else could they do to improve the support for their findings?***

Well, the French case is an exceptional one since the scientific community was committed to transformist ideas, and secular education for women was one of the rallying cries of Republican society. Thus, these cases need to be compared with those from other social, political, and cultural contexts such as Victorian Britain. Still, I felt that this was an important source that was

objectively comparing, analyzing, and synthesizing their information coherently and in a way that properly represents my own topic as discussed in the current literature.

### Summary/Conclusion

Synthesizing the data gathered from the sources, I would say that generally, maternal and paternal instincts tend to increase or grow over time, and this instinct, although not one in the same, are present in each person whether they have children or not. While this is due to many theories, the one I believe to be the most probable is that as men and women grow older and mature, they get a sense of what is really important in life - people over objects. Therefore, they are more wary to protect those people, and have more of a caring and nurturing side of their personalities. This can be seen throughout the sources listed above, such as with the Morgan-Meller study in which researchers concluded that healthcare professionals should be aware of these specific issues that exist for older first-time mothers like adjusting to work, suggesting the correlation between maternal instincts increasing and the presence of a child at all.

Similarly, in the Habib-Lancaster study, the data supported the idea that paternal foetal attachment could be predicted by father identity through the negative regression, while also discovering where paternal “instincts” or attachment typically begin to take place and strengthen, leading back to the idea that maternal and paternal instincts may tend to increase over time. In the Barbeta-Vinas study as well, they go over the process of socially developed perceptions, interactions and micropolitical activities that create a particular vision of what is masculine and feminine, which may correlate with the idea that paternal instincts may increase with age, as well as changing over time concerning a historical timeline, not just the individual’s experience. With the Turnage-Pharris study, certain factors were determined to affect how pregnant adolescents will interpret the new maternal “instincts” they begins to feel towards the infant, largely due also

to having a supportive maternal role model. Lastly, the Thomas study of 2014 concluded that the question of whether motherly love is an instinct or a socially acquired behavior remains a matter of discussion to this day, that the idea that maternal or paternal instincts can increase over time is very difficult to measure, as not everyone expresses this “instinct” the same, and its validity is still a matter of questioning. Therefore, I suppose it would be a great addition to this literature to have a survey or other test done to assess the majority of the nation’s opinions on the phrases “maternal instincts” and “paternal instincts” in order to first establish a common ground, and then perform various experiments to determine the validity of such a term, and see if it truly is something that can be measured. This is by no means a settled issue, but the general consensus appears to be centered around the thought that *empathy* - the way we care and understand one another - certainly grows with time and experiences, and perhaps this nurturing emotion could be labeled as such an instinct, as this type of instinct would certainly be beneficial in evolutionary terms, as it would have been good for the tribe or herd to watch over young children, and tend to the elderly. Perhaps this is the type of instinct we have been looking for.

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