What is the impact of peer-support groups towards helping pregnant women and mothers during the Covid-19 pandemic?

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Executive summary

Background

Mothers Uncovered offer creative support groups focused on the mother, rather than the baby. The support groups give a chance for women to speak openly without judgement about their experiences of pregnancy and motherhood. Participants can explore their experiences through writing, art, signing or mindfulness. The Covid-19 pandemic brought with it restrictions that led to social isolation; peer support groups and baby groups were moved online.

Aims

This is a qualitative research report that conducted interviews with mothers who participated in the Mothers Uncovered peer support groups during the Covid-19 pandemic. The aim was to look at the impact of the groups during this period.

Design

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two participants. A thematic analysis was carried out to identify themes in the data from the transcriptions.

Findings

Key themes identified in this report are:

- **Theme 1:** The focus on you; realisations and shifts – giving participants space to concentrate, focus and reflect on themselves. Through sharing experiences common threads were realised, which provided validation

- **Theme 2:** Community - The importance of having a community in times of social isolation

- **Theme 3:** Creativity, Writing - The creative methods used helped to gain a different perspective and new insights into their experiences

- **Theme 4:** Unacknowledged Physical Changes – More is needed to support women through the physical changes of pregnancy and birth.

Recommendations

- Continue to offer the creative peer support groups as they were seen as extremely valuable to participants
- Continue to offer both face-to-face and online peer support groups as the latter were seen as being convenient and accessible
- Continue to use creative methods within the groups, particularly creative writing as it was seen as highly beneficial for expressing and gaining insights
- To consider creating a peer support group that is focused on the physical changes that women go through during pregnancy and after birth

Introduction

The research study will look at the impact of peer support for pregnant women and mothers during the Coronavirus pandemic period from roughly June 2020 – June 2021. There are many factors that contribute to the distress pregnant women and mothers face in society. Organisations like Mothers Uncovered help to alleviate that stress by helping to build support networks and spaces where people can share their experiences and receive empathy and validation.

Mothers Uncovered

Mothers Uncovered was founded by Maggie Gordon-Walker in 2008, as a project for a registered charity, "Livestock." Following the birth of Maggie's child, Maggie felt isolated and wanted a group that focused on the mother and not the child. The Mothers Uncovered groups and workshops have expanded to cover Brighton & Hove and Worthing, supporting mums in various stages of parenthood. Mothers Uncovered offer creative support groups focused on the mother, rather than the baby. The support groups give women an opportunity to speak openly without judgement about their experiences of pregnancy and motherhood. Participants can explore their experiences through writing, art, signing or mindfulness.

Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected women, through gender inequalities, domestic violence, socioeconomic inequalities, and economic insecurity (Roberton et al., 2020; WHO, 2020). The pandemic brought heightened precarity within work; given that 61% of people working in the informal economy are women, women were less likely than men to have wage protection, job security or sickness pay and many were without maternity leave (Bhan et al., 2020). Peer support groups and baby groups in organisations were moved online, which has potentially prevented women from making friends with other women and building a support network that is integral for well-being (Papworth et al., 2021).

Barriers in accessing support

Peer support groups, even online, are hugely needed as they complement what is lacking in professional healthcare services; it can create non-hierarchical relationships that help to

overcome distrust and other barriers faced within the healthcare system (Brownson & Heisler, 2009). It is important to look at the impact of community approaches towards pregnant women and mothers in distress as many women face barriers in accessing mental health services at the individual, organisational and structural level (Davies & Allen, 2007; Edwards & Timmons, 2005; Krumm & Becker, 2006).

At an individual level there is stigma, guilt, and shame at being seen as a "incompetent mother" (Edwards and Timmons, 2005; Krumm and Becker, 2006; Davies and Allen, 2007), where 30% of women withheld negative feelings from Health Care Professionals due to fear of the baby being taken away (Edwards and Timmons, 2005; Krumm and Becker, 2006; Davies and Allen, 2007).

At an organizational and structural level, the Austerity Policies in 2010 (British Medical Association, 2018) brought funding cuts to public services and reduced investment in public infrastructure, which has led to pay freezes, staff shortages, longer waiting times and increased difficulties in accessing services when in need. Further barriers and discrimination are evident within the structural system that affect people at an individual and interpersonal level. This is shown by the Equality and Human Rights Commission report (2018) which found 11% of mothers were dismissed, made compulsorily redundant or were treated so badly that they felt they had to leave their jobs. 10% of mothers said their employers discouraged them from attending antenatal appointments. There are also criticisms of the Shared Parental Leave policy (2015), as it reinforces the role of women as primary carers. When the scheme launched, the Trade Union Congress estimated that 40% of fathers would not qualify for shared parental leave. The policy does not allow for both parents to take time off without having to transfer leave between them, and women continue to shoulder an unequal share of care.

This research

This is a qualitative research report that conducted interviews with mothers who participated in the Mother Uncovered peer support groups during the Covid-19 pandemic. From the interviews key themes were extracted and analysed such as:

Theme 1: The focus on you; realisations, and shifts

Theme 2: Community

Theme 3: Creativity, Writing

Theme 4: Unacknowledged Physical Changes

Methodology

This report used an inductive thematic analysis to extract key themes from the data. Using an inductive thematic analysis is important as it allows for the data to determine the main themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis method was chosen as it is particularly good for capturing the lived experiences, perspectives, behaviour, and practices of people (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The aim was to interview between six to eight participants. However, in the end, two participants took part in this study which may affect the quality of the research. The recruitment email asked for participants who took part in the online peer support groups during the Covid-19 pandemic. The exclusion criteria were those who were particularly vulnerable in terms of their mental health. The interviews were done via Microsoft Teams using the researcher's university account. The interviews took between 30-45 minutes and were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

The interviews were semi-structured around interview questions that were ethically approved by The University of Brighton SASS School Research Ethics panel. The interview addresses sensitive topics with a vulnerable group so the researcher needed to be careful to mitigate these issues. This was achieved through avoiding probing questions that could create distress. Giving participants two weeks after their interview to withdraw if they wish also helps to provide a sense of control over the data. The interview questions were also provided prior to the Microsoft Teams interview so that participants could feel prepared and comfortable to answer. The researcher also sent the transcripts to the participants allowing them to look over and edit their answers if they wanted to. As the researcher was associated with Mothers Uncovered, participants may have felt cautious to speak negatively about the organisation.

Findings

Theme 1: The focus on you; realisations and shifts

The peer support groups were important for participants as they gave them a space to concentrate, focus and reflect on themselves as being part of this experience of motherhood.

"...it also meant that I was able to take part without my child, because it was in the evening and he was upstairs asleep, so I just felt great like it was just my time carved out, rather than bringing him along, which also would've been fine, but I really enjoyed the fact that I didn't have to do that." (P1)

"Yeah, it was. It was just really helpful to have a space that was explicitly about reflecting on the experience of parenthood and sharing that with other people." (P2)

"Yeah, they just gave me space to reflect on my experiences and make a bit more sense of some of what was going on for me. I think you know, like when you're really sort of in something it's quite hard to have perspective on it." (P2)

For one participant it was important for them to have "time carved out" for themselves rather than bringing their child along; it gave some space that they enjoyed. One participant mentioned that it was helpful realising that they were also a part of this experience and not on the receiving end of it all. The peer support groups' focus on them as individuals helped them to recognise their importance and involvement. Another participant spoke about space to reflect on their own experiences as when you are "in it", being the experience of pregnancy and motherhood, it is "hard to have perspective on it." The peer support groups could be seen as facilitating Freire's (1970) concept of conscientisation, as within the groups a process of listening, dialogue and action praxis takes place. Listening to and discussing experiences as a group can prompt individual self-reflection, giving you "perspective" to see things and identify common threads between participants (Fiddian-Green et al., 2019). This idea of perspective and shared experiences was shown when one participant wrote about her experience when her son had a seizure:

"I wrote about a time that my son had had a seizure and gone into hospital, which it turns out is like very normal and nothing to worry about, but absolutely scary, and then and someone else wrote about a similar experience"

Through sharing experiences, common threads were realised which helped provide validation of experience that was valuable to participants. The concept of dialogue within peer support groups is important as "new meanings and different understandings emerge, creating a possibility for change" (Irving & Young, 2002:23). This was shown when one participant had a realisation through listening to another person's story that as some point she will stop breastfeeding,

"…at some point my child will stop breastfeeding, I was fortunate enough that we could breastfeed, and that really kind of blew my mind. Yeah, someone I guess highlighting that where you are now, things will change and shift and that that made me feel a little bit sad, but also a little bit amazed and excited" (P1)

Listening to a person's experience provided a different understanding of experience and a newfound appreciation of the continuous and shifting process of motherhood as she said,

"Allow yourself time to think about the things that might change and understand that they will change and to ask yourself if you want to honour that in any way, or not, you might not want to, yeah, but that was a really lovely realizing that you were part of this" (P1)

Here a certain empowerment is shown as there is a realisation that they are also part of this experience, focusing on how they would like to "honour" the changes or not. Campbell and Jovchelovitch (2000) write about the importance of peer support groups for supporting people as they help to renegotiate identities, empower through the intervention of participants, increases social capital and encourage bonding and bridging (Campbell & Jovchelovitch, 2000).

Theme 2: Community

The notion of isolation was particularly stark in the pandemic as the lockdown prevented people from using their social support networks in times of need. Guner and Ozturk (2022) in their research on the psychological and social impact among pregnant women during the COVID-19 pandemic, write that social support is necessary to "increase resilience in times of crisis" and that a lack of social support can create damaging psychological consequences with heightened feelings of loneliness (Brooks et al., 2020). One participant spoke about the difficulties of the winter lockdown, as places were shut and there were difficulties in finding places to change and care for their baby, which meant that they were inside quite a lot. Another participant commented about the experience of pregnancy and motherhood being quite an isolating experience with your support network changing,

"A lot of what is so difficult about being a parent of a young child, young children. I assume it's going to continue, but I can't really speak to parenthood of older children, is just the way that our like social structures have kind of changed. I feel like we are all very isolated, like we are all individually doing this really hard thing out of the context of community like actual community, in a way that other places in the world might experience it or historically we might have experienced it" (P2)

Previous studies have shown that support from the woman's spouse, relatives and peers had a significant impact on reducing stress and helping individuals to adapt to their role as a mother (Faramarzi & Pasha, 2015; McLeish & Redshaw, 2017). The participant comments about doing "this really hard thing out of the context of community"; as support networks within families in the UK have increasingly reduced to primarily the nuclear family, women often shoulder the burden of care (Christiane Northrup., 1998). This pressure increases the stigma, shame and guilt of women not feeling like the "perfect mother" and seeming like an "incompetent mother" (Edwards and Timmons, 2005; Krumm and Becker, 2006; Davies and Allen, 2007). 10-20% of women are affected by perinatal mental health difficulties (Centre for mental health,

2021), the perinatal period being from pregnancy through to 12 months following childbirth (Centre for mental health, 2021). Women have also expressed feeling guilty about being ill at a time when happiness was expected (Komashie et al., 2021; Sambrook Smith et al., 2019). The expectation of the ideal mother arguably exacerbates the feelings of perinatal mental health and feelings of isolation.

One participant mentioned the importance of having an organisation like Mothers Uncovered that supports women's experience throughout the continuous journey of pregnancy and motherhood, where there is not a focus on a specific time in that process.

"I think the things that had changed were specifically with Mothers Uncovered, I think, knowing that there is this organization that I can keep going back to as a mother, that what I love about them is that they're not focused on a specific timed journey of your parenting experience like mothers or first time mothers, it's like this is for anyone, anyone at any stage of your parenting journey, and I think that's really, really valuable" (P1)

It is an organisation that they can "keep going back to as a mother." This idea of having a community that women can go back to for support is vital and needed as shown with the increasing popularity of online communities that provide a valuable resource for support and information during pregnancy and motherhood (Johnson, 2015). One participant mentioned the importance of having a WhatsApp group with mothers where they could ask questions and get tips on how to help with their difficulties. Johnson (2015) in a study comparing face-to-face support groups with internet groups for women seeking information and advice, found that these groups were important as spaces for women to "legitimise their new identity as a mother" (Johnson 2015:237) and providing alternative forms of expertise that is not specifically medical.

Theme 3: Creativity, Writing

The peer support groups often used creative methods for participants to express themselves and reflect in different ways. Participants particularly spoke about the importance and almost transformational effect of writing about experiences. Deveney and Lawson (2021) write about significant benefits of creative writing for the individuals' cognitive processing of difficulties which positively lifts moods and increases mental well-being, as one participant commented,

"I think what it does for me is it helps you to just think or reflect differently, that we might all have our own modes of communicating or how we talk about something, and any sort of creative exercise just shifts you outside of that. I think it can break habits or highlight habits you might have and give you a different perspective on yourself and I remember I think we were asked to write a poem, as one of them and that reminded me that I used to write quite a lot of poetry in my teens and early 20s, that was just something I did, I did a lot of writing about how I felt, and I don't really anymore, it's really good to do, and I like it just for me." (P1)

The participant speaks about gaining a "different perspective on yourself" where writing helps you to "think or reflect differently" where the creative exercise "shifts you outside" your usual "modes of communicating." Pennebaker (2014) writes about the therapeutic effects of expressive writing, the process of writing about inner emotions as it helps the individual to

confront personal truths and in doing so the emotions your truth creates inside you (Deveney & Lawson 2022., Pennebaker, 2014). The participant speaks about writing poetry within the groups; poetry is a creative process that often uses metaphors and similes to describe things or experiences, unlike expressive writing where it is often in the first person, for example diary entries. Poetry allows for individuals to write in different modes, perhaps adopting characters or "handing over" feelings and thoughts to other things or people (Deveney & Lawson 2022). Wiitala and Dansereau (2004) write that this form of creative writing forces writers to have a more externalised view of experiences, thus gaining a different perspective.

Within the peer support groups participants would share their writing together. Deveney and Lawson's (2021) study also found that writing for an audience – imagined or not – was helpful, as knowing it was to be read required participants to create "structure out of what had hitherto been emotional chaos" (Deveney and Lawson., 2022:298). One participant spoke about "unlocking something emotionally" that perhaps would not have been unlocked if it was not approached in a creative way,

"I remember a few of the writing exercises, really kind of like, allowing me to sort of unlock something emotionally or sort of tap into something emotionally that I don't think I would have done if we hadn't been approaching it that way." (P2)

Another participant wrote about how the creative process brought some clarity around her experience of her mother dying when she was a toddler,

"So, my mum died when I was a toddler and so a lot of, I think a lot of my experience of early parenthood was sort of processing that in a slightly unconscious way, and I think something in doing that group like the writing exercises, particularly really, sort of clarified some stuff for me around that and I think, so that sort of shifted something for me a bit emotionally. I think I probably felt more that some of the experiences that we were having were more valid." (P2)

The participant mentions that something "shifted" for her emotionally. Deveney and Lawson (2021) write about the creative process allowing for elements of catharsis, where – in their study – participants experienced a sense of relief through disclosing something and subsequently a change in perspective with new insights, which brought about a more empowered state. In the Fiddian-Green et al (2019) study on the importance of digital storytelling, they write that assembling stories into a cohesive whole can grant the individual a sense of control over their health experience, which can be both cathartic and therapeutic. Another participant mentioned realising within the peer support groups that she used to write a lot of poetry; the remembering of skills already known within peer support groups can help to provide a sense of empowerment (Kagan et al., 2011).

Theme 4: Unacknowledged Physical Changes

When asked about what additional support was needed for helping pregnant women and mothers, participants mentioned there was a lack of support surrounding the physical changes a mother's body goes through. From the lack of support and information in addressing the changes in the body and being supported to understand that your body will never be the same,

"One of the things I've noticed that, I think is a missing area is around the physical changes you go through and, I know there are some fitness groups out there for new mums, but from my own experiences I think they are not addressing the actual changes your body goes through and knowing fully and being supported to understand your body will never be what it was, it is utterly changed and that is never said to you, but I had to have an emergency C-section and the kind of aftercare of that was, "here's a leaflet, read some stuff off your pop", and actually looking after my scar and massaging it is a really big part of aftercare, my pelvic floor has changed, my body has changed and I'm physical performer and that has been at points quite a struggle, even though I thought it would be a bit different, yea it still isn't the same as being able to I guess chat about that with people who understand what's happening physically" (P1)

The participant mentions that your body is "utterly changed" and how that is never said to you. This notion of transformation is discussed in Iris Marion Young's (1984) writing on pregnancy, subjectivity, and alienation. Young writes that – especially if it is the person's first child - they experience "birth as a transition to a new self that she may desire and fear" (1984:54). The participant mentions that she is a physical performer where this bodily change at times has been a "struggle"; Young discusses the loss of identity and fear some people experience after birth where "she herself became a transformed person, such that she would 'never be the same again'"(Young, 1984:54).

This idea of vital information about physical and subjective experiences not being said to you was also expressed by another participant, who felt there was a lack of support surrounding weaning, feeling that it is a significant transition that is not fully acknowledged,

"Oh, I just remembered another support thing. Yeah, also did recently set up a like a kind of sharing circle group around weaning, which I feel like there are a lot of just a lot of experiences which I think are like basically sort of female experiences that are just not like talked about or considered, or culturally, probably because they belong to women? And yeah, weaning feels to me like one of those like really massive transitions that nobody, it just isn't really acknowledged as a thing almost" (P2)

This participant denotes that there are a lot of female experiences that are not talked about or considered. Young (1984) writes that the discourse on pregnancy neglects subjectivity as the experiences of women have been absent from westerns culture's discourse about human experience. This coincides with the feminist debate surrounding publics, which argue that women's private concerns are excluded from the public sphere (Travers, 2003) as female bodies are considered fleshier and more bodily and will not be tolerated in the public arena (DiPalma, 1997).

One participant speaks about having an emergency C section where her support for aftercare was being given a leaflet. They describe that experience as quite abrupt and almost disempowering: "read some stuff off you pop." Nisha writes about the medicalisation of the female body and motherhood, whereby medicine has played a significant role in shaping how women's bodies are perceived. Nisha argues that medicine pathologizes women's procreative functions, implying they need medical control and involvement. This objective medicalisation has meant that women are "no longer acquainted with their maternal body and lack birthing knowledge" (Nisha, 2021:26). Nisha writes about the historical shift of power from women

midwives to men in the healthcare profession and writes that women's mothering knowledge gradually became viewed as less competent than men and women were directed to follow the instructions of medically skilled individuals, leading to the medicalisation of the body (Nisha 2020:27) and thus power in the hands of healthcare professionals. Christiane Northrup (1998) writes that this lack of birthing knowledge can make the experience of birth a disempowering experience in western cultures, where women are seen as lacking agency and denial of their bodily choices and autonomy.

Due to a lack of support, one participant set up their own weaning group as they felt a need to speak to other women about this transitional period and another participant mentions that even knowing their body was going to change it still is not the same as speaking about it with people who understand what is happening physically, thus highlighting the importance of peer support groups in helping women get the support and validation they need.

Conclusion

The aim of this research report was to evaluate the impact of peer support groups for pregnant women and mothers during the Covid-19 pandemic. The participants who were interviewed described their experience with Mothers Uncovered as quite a meaningful, empowering and validating experience. Reasons for this included:

- It gave them space to concentrate, focus, and reflect on themselves
- Through sharing experiences, common threads were realised, which provided validation
- The importance of having a community in times of social isolation
- The creative methods used helped to gain a different perspective and new insights into their experiences

The peer support groups gave "time carved out" for participants to concentrate on themselves, where they got the chance to not be "on the receiving end of it all", where they felt that they too were important and significant in this experience, not just the baby. With the act of listening and dialogue, participants got validation through shared experiences. Sharing also brought to light new realisations and shifts in how they would like to "honour" the continuous changes in their experiences – or not. The peer support group brought a sense of community that was important in times of isolation in general and specifically during the Covid-19 pandemic. Importance was placed on having an organisation like Mothers Uncovered out there that they could "keep going back to" as it supports women throughout the continuous parenting journey. The creative aspects to the peer support group were extremely valuable to participants, particularly the writing and the sharing of pieces as it allowed for them to reflect differently, to tap into something emotionally, and gain new perspectives that perhaps would not have been unlocked if they were not approached in this way. When asked about what more support was needed in general for mothers, participants felt there was a lack of support surrounding the physical changes the body goes through during pregnancy and after birth, how bodily transitional changes are not acknowledged, and feeling like there was a need to speak to others who understood and had this knowledge.

Limitations of this study

- The sample size of the study was small with only two participants taking part
- Those participants who had particularly vulnerable mental health were excluded from the research
- The researcher was known to the participants as working with Mothers Uncovered to gather research for this report, so participants may have felt the need to provide positive feedback

Recommendations

- Continue to offer the creative peer support groups as they were seen as extremely valuable to participants
- Continue to offer both face-to-face and online peer support groups as they were seen as being convenient and accessible
- Continue to use creative methods within the groups, particularly creative writing as it was seen as highly beneficial for expressing and gaining insights
- To consider creating a peer support group that is focused on the physical changes that women go through throughout pregnancy and after birth

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Appendix

Interview questions:

What is the impact of peer-support groups towards helping pregnant women and mothers during the Covid-19 pandemic?

1. What prompted you to become involved with MU?

2. Can you share any reflections you have on the difference between online and face to face MU sessions?

3. Did you feel you were able to build relationships within these groups?
    a. If so, how important were these relationships for you?
    b. Have these relationships continued after the peer support groups ended?

4. Were these groups important for you during the Covid-19 pandemic?
    a. If so how were they important?
    b. If not how could they be improved?

5. Can you tell me about any meaningful times for you during the peer support groups?

6. Were there any creative aspects to the peer support groups? How do you feel the creative aspects impacted you?
    (probe – use of art, meditation, singing etc)
    a. If not, would creative aspects be useful to include in these groups? Why/why not?

7. Have you used any community-based support during your pregnancy and as a mother?
    a. If so, could you tell me about the support you got?
    b. Was it easy to know about this support and to access it?
    c. What more support is needed for pregnant women and mothers?

8. At the end of or during attending the peer support groups what, if anything, had changed for you?