**The *Baby Group*: Charting the typologies of a parental community of practice.**

A submission for

Leisure Studies

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**Abstract:**

This paper presents an initial exploration of the ‘baby group’. These informal associations of parents (typically mothers) and their children function as important sites of support and friendship. As peer-constituted and mediated ‘communities of practice’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998, 2000), ‘baby’ or ‘mother’s groups’ present as significant forums for negotiating prevailing knowledge-structures that circulate around parenting. In making a case for the baby-group as a social learning system and expression of a core discussion group, this paper will chart a typology of the baby group via an analysis of, firstly, the scholarly and grey-literature attached to baby groups and secondly, an initial incursion into focus group and interview-derived data collected during discussions with one such group located in south-east Queensland, Australia. These two sources provide the foundation from which this paper will offer initial insights into the role and purpose of the baby group, and from which an agenda for the further exploration of the baby group might commence.

**Introduction: The milieu of contemporary parenting**

Pressure to be the *perfect* parent features as a significant theme within contemporary accounts of parenting, with prominent popular cultural representations of the parent and parenting providing cues as to how parenting should be performed1. Although accounts of the bad-parent-made-good make for captivating narratives of redemption2 in popular cultural mediations, it remains that being a less-than-perfect parent carries stigma in real-life (Skenazy, 2008). Parenting is a contested activity, where getting-it-wrong attracts the application of a range of sanctions and interventions. These mediations of parenting practice not only provide insight into the nature of those expectations that surround parenting, but also indicate how ideals of parenting are prefigured in the public imagination (Assarsson & Aarsand, 2011).

Predominant amongst these representations are specific gender-role associations attributable to (primarily) mothers (but increasingly also fathers), and that stand as markers of ‘who’ the parent should be and how one’s identity as a parent is implicated within wider assumptions associated with parenting. Within this logic, to be a bad mother is to concomitantly underperform as a woman, with prominent, popular psycho-social pathologisations of the under- (and, as is increasingly also the case, over-3) performing woman-as-mother suggested in ‘conditions’ like ‘playground panopticism’ (Blackford, 2004) and ‘helicopter parenting’ (Somers & Settle, 2010), as well as more dispositional susceptibilities that include ‘motherguilt’ (Buttrose & Adams, 2005; Badinter, 2012), ‘scientific mothering’ (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005), the ‘perfect mum syndrome’ (McElroy, 2011; Savage, 2013), ‘tiger-parenting’ (Chua, 2011) and ‘puritan-parenting’ (Oppenheimer, 2013).

This is the lot of the contemporary parent; an identity position marked by complex negotiations of multifarious points of expectation around how one should parent, what ‘counts’ as parenting, and how it is that this role should be effectively performed. As something of a consequence, Luke (1994) notes that the array of ‘discourses’ that surround parenting—discourses that inform and reinforce specific expectations of parenting—has spawned a cottage industry of both formal and informal sources of advice and guidance, including a plethora of print and web-based advice columns, blogs and popular press publications, in conjunction (and competition) with legal, medical and psycho-socio-logical ‘official knowledge’ (Apple, 1993, 2000). To contravene prevailing views of parenting means to work against the tide of popular opinion; getting parenting wrong attracts the ire of society, whilst having the ‘secrets’ of good parenting can lead to best-seller status3.

It is against this dynamic of competing models of parenting and the pressure to perform effectively as a parent that this paper presents an exploration of the phenomenon of the ‘baby group’. These informal gatherings of parents (typically mothers) and their children stand as a significant point of intersection for the array of discourses that circulate around the act of parenting and provide for their members a source of knowledge and support in the activation of parenting-as-practice. As peer-constituted and mediated ‘communities of practice’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998, 2000), ‘baby’ or ‘mother’s groups’ offer a significant point of negotiation of broader discourses and knowledge-structures that inform parenting, and as dynamic sites of shared experiential knowledge formation, provide potential for the negotiation of otherwise prevailing views of the role and identity of the parent and the practice of parenting.

In detailing the broad dimensions of the baby-group, this paper will chart a typology of the baby group’s purpose and structure via an analysis of, firstly, the scholarly and ‘grey-literature’ (Schöpfel & Farace, 2010; Lawrence, 2012) attached to baby groups and secondly, an initial incursion into focus group and interview data derived from an ethnography of one such group located in south-east Queensland, Australia. These two sources provide the basis upon which a set of preliminary understandings of the role that baby groups fulfil as sites of consolidation, resistance and mediation of prevailing accounts of parenting will be outlined.

**The literature**

The existing scholarly literature contains scant mention of the function, significance and effects of informal groupings of parents as ‘baby’ or ‘mother’s groups’4. Instead, focus is given to i) formally constituted, institutionally mediated post-natal, health or education-care groups established in schools, clinics and maternity wards, such as those identified by Tilden and Tilden (1984), Telleen, Herzog and Kilbane (1989), Vincent and Martin (2000), and Fielden and Gallagher (2008); ii) formally constituted, institutionally mediated clinical support groups associated with post-trauma care and support of parents and their children, as outlined by, for example, Yozwiak (2010), Taft et al. (2011), and Ammerman et al. (2011); iii) the role of support networks for new parents (and mothers in particular) who have experienced traumatic pregnancies and/or early parenthood, as evident in the literature on support networks and the ‘transition’ to parenthood presented by Colman (1971), Schwatrz (1974), Wandersman, Wandersman and Kahn (1980), Telleen, Herzog and Kilbane (1989); iv) education and awareness oriented support networks (typically with a focus on the parents of developmentally-challenged children), such as those discussed by Sanders (1999); and v) intervention groups aimed at resolving issues with violence, criminality and other anti-social behaviour existent within the family network, for example those identified by Hardy and Streett (1989) and Lockwood (2010).

Although related to the focus of this paper, discussion of ‘play groups’ as sites of shared interaction and engagement between groups of mothers and their children is present in the literature (see particularly Roper & Hinde, 1978; McBride, 1990; Berthelsen, Williams, Abad, Vogel & Nicholson, 2012; Crowe, 2013), however attention within this body of work is predominantly focussed on the developmental influence these groups have on participating children. In extension to this literature, consideration of the institutional sites that children encounter within their progression through the early-years of education is also prominent (Vincent & Ball, 2006). In particular, Vincent and Ball (2006) note how imperatives for child-care intersect with early-childhood education and the pragmatics of the day-to-day care of children, noting that ‘responsibility for children, and for organising and managing childcare…rests with the mother, illustrating the robustness and longevity of traditional gender roles’ (p. 3). Although implicating the role of the parent and the broad associations parents form when engaged in the practice of childcare and decision-making on their children’s formal education, the emphasis in these works nonetheless rests with the experience of the child. It remains that only tangential consideration of the experience of parents within these practices of childcare are offered, with the focus remaining heavily fixed on the social and pedagogical transformation of participating children.

Bell and Ribbens (1994) and Bell’s (1995) innovative work provides the closest connection to the type of group explored in this paper. Drawing on Hill’s (1987) initial surveys, this work charts the associations formed between groups of mothers who met as a babysitting ‘circle’. Although using the designation ‘playgroup’ to describe this network, this work differs in definition to that found in associated research to suggest a grouping that ‘developed and operated autonomously’ (Hill, 1987), and ‘provided emotional support between women locally’ (Bell, 1995). This theme of ‘support’ will re-emerge later in this paper as an important definitional marker of the baby groups explored here, but to set Bell and Ribbons’ (1994) and Bell’s (1995) work in context, the focus they give to the babysitting ‘circle’ as a site for sociable interaction by parents prefaces the instrumental use of social ‘networks’ to mobilise and extend social capital and knowledge-sharing around parenting. This anticipates Drentea and Moren-Cross’ (2005) exploration of social capital within a ‘mothering board on a parent’s website’ (p. 920) and Mulcahy, Parry and Glover’s (2010) ‘critical social capital analysis’ (p. 3) of a similar network of new mothers (again with the focus centred on the ways the networks activated by these groups worked to support individual members).

In extension to Mulcahy, Parry and Glover’s (2010) work, studies that explore the effects of social class, and in particular, middle-class positionality, on parenting choices and styles offer further insight into how questions of cultural and social capital correspond with socio-economic status to afford parents particular opportunities and ‘choices’ in their parenting. Prominent amongst this is work by Annette Lareau (1987, 2000, 2002). Lareau’s (2002) consideration of middle-class parenting as the ‘concerted cultivation’ of the child, draws consideration of the socio-economic dimensions of parenting within the fold of larger questions of consumption and class aesthetics. Brusdal and Frønes (2012) follow a similar argument, using Veblen’s (1899/1994) notion of ‘vicarious consumption’ to characterise the choices that parents not only make, but have available, in the determination of their child’s educative, leisure and social development.

Yet, it is with the definition of the ‘mother’s group’ outlined by Mulcahy, Parry and Glover’s (2010) study that resonance with the groups explored in this paper is most clearly found. In charting the typology of their case-group, Mulcahy, Parry and Glover (2010) draw distinction between ‘grassroots’ mother’s groups—associations ‘of mothers connected informally through friends or neighbours’—and those organised ‘more formally through pre- or post-natal programmes’ (p. 4). This is an important distinction and identifies the way that the literature configures its understandings of these groups as either; i) organised ‘organically’by members via informally constituted channels and networks, or, ii) motivated via (usually) ‘institutional’ third-parties (such as a clinic or hospital) and arranged as formally organised and structured groupings. The focus of this paper is on the formation and operation of the former type, with the descriptors ‘organic’ and ‘informal’ used here as key terms of identification of this group type5. Very little substantive research has been conducted on the formation and nature of groups of this type; a situation perhaps all the more surprising given that this form of association is clearly recognised by parents and discussed in popular parenting forums (such as those web-based forums considered below).

*The limitations of the scholarly literature*

Although this emerging stock of scholarly literature provides some insight into the dynamics and implications of the baby group, it was predominantly within the ‘grey literature’—via blogs, opinion columns and other web published material—that a full sense of ‘baby groups’ was extrapolated.

That a seeming gap exists in the scholarly literature on the role, significance and prevalence of the baby group is somewhat surprising. As significant sites within which support, sharing of experience and the validation of one’s parenting style occurs, the paucity of formal, scholarly literature exploring the structures, functioning, roles and significance of baby groups highlights a need for further exploration of how these groups form and the effects they have. How it is that parenting comes to be understood and lived-through the dynamic of the baby group, how practices of parenting find articulation within these associations, and more broadly, how these groups function within the complex of systems and institutions whose work is focused on the care and well-being of families, parents and young people, present as fruitful areas for scholarly investigation.

**Key themes from the ‘grey’ literature**

It is within the grey literature specifically that accounts of the nature and form of baby-groups is most readily found. This literature provided an invaluable reference source for establishing ‘base line’ understandings of how informally constituted baby groups formed and were conducted. Using a selection of prominent websites and blogs dedicated to parenting, search keywords including ‘baby group’, ‘mother’s group’ and ‘support group’ were used to generate searches of these site’s columns, blogs and forum listings. Results from these searches were then compiled and thematically sorted according to emergent themes that corresponded with the conduct, formation and nature of baby groups. From this, themes identifying the structure of group formation, the role of support as core to the sociality of the group and the baby group as a site of knowledge and expertise emerged as prominent definitional markers.

*Group formations*

The nature of the baby group’s formation presented as a major theme within the grey-literature. Questions around how the group was constituted, who was responsible for its formation and where the group met and how meetings were convened reoccurred in the various discussion lists, blogs and other web-based sources uncovered during the analysis of the literature. For instance, and in confirming the distinction made above regarding differences between formality and informality of group structure, broad distinction was made between groups run by hospitals, clinics, schools, ‘childcare cooperatives, universities, libraries, churches, synagogues, or other religious or community organizations’ (BabyCentre, 2013a), and those run informally via existing friendship and collegial networks. This point of distinction aligns with Mulcahy, Parry and Glover’s (2010) distinction between ‘grassroots’ and ‘formal’ groups (as noted above) and provides a primary definitional marker for the group engaged for this study. That is, *formality*/*informality* provides a foundational dichotomy within this typology of the baby group.

In order to explain and offer some definition around ‘type’ and form of baby group structures, the application of *informality*—as a descriptor of baby group type—was applied as a definitional marker that corresponded with; i) the organic forms of association members of the group enacted, and ii) the continued engagement members activated as a community of practice, separate (and separated) from an overarching involvement by a ‘third-party’ organisation or auspicing body. For example, those groups who met in third-party organised groups (that is, groups organised and run by, for example, hospitals, clinics and similar organisations) and who undertook scheduled activities or met for a specific purpose as part of these groupings are classed here as *formally* constituted, whilst those groups formed via the personal networks of members find classification as *informally* constituted.

In making this distinction, the role of the institution in formalising the ways that knowledge is handled and authorised within the group dynamic is linked to the organisational structure/s within which the group sits. So, although a group organised by an institutional partner may well convene according to the group member’s interests and concerns and go about its interaction and discussion as these emerge ‘organically’ (that is, without a mandate to convene according to a schedule arranged by the third-party institution), it remains that the group’s formation is nonetheless arranged under the auspice of the institutional sponsor (for example, a post-birth group organised via a clinic or maternity ward). It is the ‘formality’ of this institutional provocation that defines this group type in this instance.

Again, the key points of distinction in group type reside with the nature of the group’s association as ‘organically’ or ‘institutionally’ mediated, how structures for meeting are scheduled, and the ways that activities are codified as concerns emergent from *within* the group or third party. With these indicators, a sense of the distinctions that mark the different formations of baby groups can be found.

*Support and the baby group*

Defining the nature of the baby group provides a notable theme within the grey literature:

Whether you call them Mother and Baby groups, Parent and Toddler groups, Stay and Play or just toddler groups, they all mean the same thing and are run for carers of babies and toddlers. (NetMums, 2013)

Setting definitions and a descriptive vocabulary around the nature of these groups was prominent within each of the sources examined for this paper, but further, it was with the way that these definitions of group type were mobilised around certain ideals and practices that specific thematic focus was drawn. For instance, within definitions such as the one offered above, *support* features as a significant function of the baby group. Taken further, this notion of ‘support’ is set in context of the stresses of parenthood and the propensity for social isolation experienced by the new parent (particularly the ‘stay-at-home’ parent). In setting a sense of the nature of the baby group as a community of practice, support emerged as a notable function of the group’s purpose; a theme that is evident in the following accounts:

The ABA [Australian Breastfeeding Association] was founded by a group of mothers with the aim of helping other mothers and this 'mother-to-mother' support is the keystone of our local groups. You can come along and meet new friends, chat to and get hints and tips from other mothers who've 'been there'. (Australian Breastfeeding Association, n.d.)

During those early days with your newborn you can feel quite isolated. Just getting out of the house can be hard enough; the thought of being sociable and making new friends can seem impossible. Don't worry, the great thing about meeting other new mums is that they know just how you feel.(BabyCentre, 2018)

Support through shared experience presents as a significant defining feature of the baby group within the grey literature. Similarly, associated themes including *isolation* and *loneliness*, *fatigue* and *adjustment* to life with the new baby—conditions that the baby group sought to counter via the provision of support—also featured as prominent in these definitions. There exists a clear connection in the literature between these feelings and experiences—of isolation, loneliness, alienation—and the role the baby group plays as a site of support; so-much-so that these references to the affective condition of parenthood are positioned as recognisable conditions that will be experienced by parents, and according to which the baby group fulfills much of its purpose.

*Baby group as a site of knowledge*

Beyond this positioning of support as a crucial feature of the baby group, an important further theme emerges from the grey-literature; the baby group as a *site of knowledge production* and *repository of experience*. As indicated in posts on one major parenting website (BabyCentre, 2018, 2013b) the positioning of the baby group as a site of experiential knowledge further defines the baby group’s purpose:

The group was established in 1999 to meet the specific needs of new moms and to help answer their myriad questions: How can I get some sleep? Is my newborn's behavior normal? I used to work—now, how can I entertain myself all day at home? (BabyCentre, 2018)

Apart from further identifying the group as a site of support, this account also points toward the utilisation of the group as a repository of knowledge. This sharing of information and exchange of experience indicates not only a pragmatic concern for the imparting of knowledge on myriad aspects of parenting, but also the affective relaying of support; an empathetic acknowledgement that one’s experience is not isolated. This theme is indicated in the following example, noted on another prominent parenting website:

Looking forward to getting to know the new mums, and sharing this challenging but wonderful journey with you all. Here's to many a conversation about nipples and baby poop  :-).(Essential Baby, 2013)

This theme of *knowledge* and its corollary of *experience* will be touched on later in this paper with reference to focus-group and one-to-one interview discussions had with members of the case-group engaged for this project. But as per the instances noted here, the idea that these forums function as sites of ‘learning’, and more specifically as sites where the exchange of knowledge-as-experience occurs, a major purpose of the baby group—particularly for new parents—is found.

This exchange of experience-as-knowledge and sharing of support (enacted according to the relative levels of expertise held by group members) is conceptualised here as an expression of a ‘community of practice’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998, 2000). Wenger (2000) identifies communities of practice in terms of the networking that individuals engaged in ‘social learning systems’ enact, and illustrates the intricacies of these networks when noting the following observations:

Consider two extreme cases. Sometimes, we are a newcomer. We join a new community. We are a child who cannot speak yet. Or we are a new employee. We feel like a bumbling idiot among the sages. We want to learn. We want to apprentice ourselves. We want to become one of them. We feel an urgent need to align our experience with the competence ‘they’ define. Their competence pulls our experience. (p. 226-7)

The significance of conceptualising the baby group as a community of practice corresponds with the ways that learning is practiced by the group, and how this learning is framed according to the stock of experience held by the group’s individual members. Whether or not this knowledge functions according to ‘official’ (Apple, 1993, 2000), formal knowledge is somewhat immaterial, as the group establishes the boundaries by which *its* knowledge is configured to shape how learning occurs *in the group*. This formation of a ‘local knowledge’ (Okere, Njoku & Devish, 2011; Hickey & Austin, 2011) is central to the definition of the baby group, and it is according to the members of the group and the relative expertise they hold and share with each other that the community of practice is defined. Hence, it is via the social learning system that learning features as a function of the group, with this aspect of the baby group also central to its definition. I touch on this aspect of the group dynamic below, in reference to the ways that expertise was recognised within the membership of case group.

**Methods: A case example**

To further illuminate the definitions of the baby group extrapolated from the literature, an ethnographic study of one such group was undertaken. The group met regularly (every fortnight) in a regional city located in south-east Queensland, Australia, and comprised of 7 mothers and their children. All members of this group were involved in focus-group discussions convened over the course of a 12-month period with 5 group gatherings visited by the author. During these discussions, further one-to-one interviews were convened with specific members of the group; the 4 original conveners of the group and longest participating members. These one-to-one interviews were convened to specify points that emerged from the focus group dialogue and provided an opportunity to probe ideas, concepts and themes that emerged from the wider focus-group discussions.

Significantly, these 4 members of the group were perceived as holding specific levels of expertise by the wider group; partly because of the long-term association these participants had as founding members of the group, but also, and more directly, because these participants were mothers of 2 or more children. Knowledge and expertise were displayed in this sense via a mode of ‘long-term’ practice; an expertise that less-experienced members of the group looked toward for guidance.

All members of the group identified as heterosexual and fulfilled hetero-normative (cis) female gender roles. Each member of the group identified as ‘middle-class’ with levels of income and perceived cultural capital providing the principal indicators for where these women self-identified against wider social hierarchies. This in itself was significant, and the ways that aspects of class identity were displayed via modes of discussion, income, the aesthetics of taste and disposition (Bourdieu, 1984) and the fact that these members were in a position to devote time to the group were significant (Daly, 2002). All members identified as first-language speakers of English, and although diverse ethnicities were present in individual genealogies, all members identified as ‘white’ Australian.

Using focus group, interview and observational techniques within a larger ethnographic approach, this project asked questions informed by the literature regarding i) the nature of parenting in contemporary Australia, ii) how the formation of the ‘baby group’ was initialised, iii) how camaraderie and support were drawn-on by individual members in these groups, and iv) how knowledge was consumed and produced within the group. In particular, questions exploring how informal learning on issues related to motherhood and parenting occurred, and how responses to ‘official’ accounts of motherhood presented via institutional and systemic authorities (such as hospitals and health professionals) were negotiated and interpreted drove the initial discussions with the group participants.

The focus group and interview discussions were framed by a ‘dialogic’ (Carspecken, 1996) interview style, whereby general themes of discussion were brokered as prompts for discussion, and from which the flow of conversation progressed iteratively according to emergent themes developed during the conversation. Recordings of these dialogues were subsequently transcribed via a commercial transcription service, and thematic analysis of the transcripts undertaken to uncover emergent themes. Psuedonyms have been applied to all participants reported in this paper. This material formed the core of the data-set compiled for this project, with a further participant-observation derived dataset comprising ‘scratch-notes’ (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995) providing the author the means of recording considerations of noted moments and occurences that seemed worthy of capturing for later, deeper, consideration. This observational data, captured in the form of ethnographic fieldnotes (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995) was examined as part of the larger analysis undertaken for this paper, but is not reported-on explicitly here.

**Results**

*Typologies of the baby group*

Discussions commenced with a broad survey of group members’ experiences with baby groups. Apart from a more general inquiry into the group members’ experiences with other groups, discussion turned to experiences with *formally* constituted groups; the formally constituted, institutionally organised group-type identified above. In particular, one member revealed how a group organised for partners of military personnel in Australia operated:

There was a lady who organised it and she was actually paid by the Army—Defence [the Australian Government’s Department of Defence]. She would do an activity with the kids. But most of the time, it was sitting around and talking and drinking coffee. Then there was a great outside play area. It was so well equipped and so many fun things for the kids to do that I kept going back (Suzanne).

The key point of definition for this group lay in its organisation by an external body; in this case the Australian Government’s Department of Defence. This aligned closely with the experiences of another participant, who had attended a formally organised group run by *Playgroups Australia*:

It was run by *Playgroups Australia*; called *Playgroups Plus*. It was trying to get them [the children] ready for day care, so there was an actual structure. They got there and they played, then there was craft, then there was a sit-down morning tea for the children (Karen).

The emphasis here is on the structure applied to the group and the affiliation with a third-party institution, but within the descriptions of the groups offered by Suzanne and Karen, it also emerged that the focus was very much on the interactions of the children, and not the parents specifically. As Karen continued:

 The kids are all sitting around a table and mums would help their kids make the playdough or whatever, but the mothers didn’t talk. They leave [sic] the kids to play. It was more for the kid’s interaction.

These anecdotes provided a useful context for exploring the differences between the groups these members had attended and how formality-informality functioned as a core organising logic by which the various groups operated. Importantly, these examples give focus to the interaction of the participating children in these particular groups, with any potential association amongst parents a largely incidental outcome of the associations these groups fostered.

In offering a comparison to the formal structures of these organised groups, the participants noted how the *organic-informal* nature of their present group contrasted:

Jessica: It was [Anna] and [Karen] that started it. We all have kids the same age, so we just wanted to get together.

Karen: see, it all started in the pharmacy because all us pharmacy girls work together. [Lisa]—another girl that was with us—had a baby at the same time, or just after… [Andrea] was highly pregnant with [James] and I was highly pregnant with [Mitchell]. Then so we said, “let’s introduce [Andrea] to the group”. That is how it started with us.

This stands as a key point of differentiation between the formal and informal group type and the way that friendship networks functioned as the organisational dynamic of the group. Networks of association featured as a significant component of the group dynamic and were highlighted regularly during the discussions with the participants. Significantly it was the identification of ‘strong ties’ amongst members and the ways that these ties were demonstrated through various protocols and codes of conduct for the organisation and enactment of the group that a sense of the connection between members was gained. While existing friendships did provoke the initial formation of the group, it emerged that new forms of these existing friendships developed as the group consolidated, and as new members were introduced to the group.

The forms of association presented by this group are taken here as an example of how ‘strong ties’ function within small-group structures. These associations also defined the group as an expression of a ‘core discussion network’ (Marsden, 1987; McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Brashears, 2006). As the relationships between members developed and found meaning, the modes of interaction and mechanisms of support that each member used to ‘ask for help, probe for information, or just use as a sounding board for important decisions’ (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Brashears, 2006, p. 355) gained purpose. It was via the group as a core discussion network that members oriented their experiences of parenting, sought advice, provided support and more intrinsically, came to understandings of their identities as parents.

Demonstration of the baby group as a core-discussion network was particularly evident in the way that support was offered by and between members. As elicited during the conversations with the group, ‘support’ and care for each other emerged as a prominent marker of the group’s dynamic:

Andrea: It's more support and getting out of the house with the baby.

Lauren: Just talking about our different problems.

Anna: Just having similar…You compare.

These themes were repeated later in the same conversation, with emphasis shifting to how care for members in the group functioned. Significantly, comparisons to another individual within the group-member’s core discussion group—her partner—was raised:

Andrea: You don't understand sometimes. Males don't understand what we go through, where the other mums can understand that we went through hell last night with bub, getting up two or three times of a night while you slept.

Jessica: That's right. That actually did happen in my house last night!

Andrea: They question that you've been home all day so “what the heck have you been doing?”

This line of reasoning was resolved with one member noting:

Sam: It's not just about … coming here and whinging about your husband either, but *it's just we understand*. *We understand each other*. (emphasis added)

Importantly, it was this articulation of a differentiation between the roles played by individuals within the group members’ core discussion networks that insight into the significance of the baby group was identified. As a component of the individual members’ core discussion network the group functioned as a site of verification and validation on such things as parenting style and being a partner. Of course, this is not to suggest that such positive and affirming experiences of the baby group as a core discussion network are universal, as Mulcahy, Parry and Glover’s (2010) analysis of exclusion and ‘play group politics’ makes clear, but that in this particular instance it was the group that provided a context for the sharing of deep-held views, feelings and vulnerabilities. As Andrea, Jessica and Sam identified, the group provided space for understanding to occur.

*Support and ‘shared experience’*

This articulation of support as central to the group inculcated the concomitant theme of *shared experience*, and uncovered a sense of the logics that underpinned how support came to be lived as part of the group. Support was issued according to an understanding of *what it meant to require support*; an empathetic realisation of the shared experience between members of the group. A prominent example of how this was discussed is captured in the following:

Lauren: I've gotten to the stage where our laundry is—that's the “clean basket”. It doesn't get into the drawers!! You get positive reinforcement that you're not completely hopeless.

Sam: Other people are doing it too.

Lauren: I think it's having friends who don't have kids who walk in your house and go—and they don't have kids—so they don't realise. Then you have other people who've got kids and you can—you get together and you're like, my house is like that too.

Andrew: Is this a ‘shared experience’?

Lauren: Exactly.

Andrew: A confirmation that you are *normal*?

Sam: That's right.

Lauren: Yes and when kids are being naughty or destructive or whatever and then you go and you find *he's not autistic*. *He's just a four year old!* (emphasis added)

The articulation of shared experience also provided a method of validation—of personal comparison and the seeking of perspective via the other members of the group. As a core discussion group, in which intimate, closely held feelings, concerns, joys and beliefs were shared, and whereby a sense of self was gained through the discussion of shared experience, this referencing of the self to the group provided an important measure of how one was coping and performing as a parent. This was an important aspect of the interactions of the group in that processes of validation through shared experience provided affirming counter-narratives to dominant popular cultural imagery of parenthood, mothering and femininity (including the pressure to be the *perfect* mother, and so on).

*Organisation, structure and the pragmatics of convening*

Building on the identification of the baby group as a core discussion group, and site for the mobilisation of strong ties, reference to the format and structure of the group also emerged within the focus group discussions. One member noted this aspect of the organisation of the group:

Andrea: If it's not organised, you know you never do it, whereas it's a set day every fortnight you know you're going to be there. Whereas if you just go, oh yeah we should catch up one day, it never happens.

Commitment to the group was an important feature of this group. As a gesture of loyalty to the group and marker of respect for the nature of the connections existent within the group, ensuring attendance and participation emerged as a core aspect of the group’s ethic:

Lauren: It’s a commitment. I think that there’s a commitment that you make by coming, that you will come each fortnight and participate in that.

This was especially highlighted when it emerged that one member of the group was unable to attend scheduled meetings due to changed commitments at work. Being unable to attend for a period of several months resulted in a sense of isolation from the group, and some angst around how the group should continue without this member’s presence. The group were active in attempting to change the meeting time, but due to conflicting commitments and the pressures of work and family, this was unable to be done. It emerged that some tensions developed over this—due primarily to feelings of being ‘left out’—with this experience noted by the authors as being a significant expression of the group’s ‘ethic’.

The experience of having one of the group’s members unable to attend subsequently identified the ways that membership within the group functioned. As part of one of the discussions with the group on how accommodations and shifted schedules came to be negotiated, it was noted that the group operated as a ‘closed’ unit. Although relatively ‘open’ member networks had been deployed when establishing the group, it had emerged as the group consolidated that less emphasis was given to recruiting new members. The ‘core’ group had been established, and although one new member had joined during the time the fieldwork for this paper was conducted, it was noted that this ‘new’ member was a close friend of several of the members in the group and was known to the others. This aspect of the group was explained by two of the members:

Sam: We’re in a bubble. We’re totally in a bubble really.

Lauren: We create that. We create a *safe* environment.

Sam: I mean that in a nice way, that we’re in a bubble. We keep close to ourselves and keep this comfortable and safe environment. We don’t expose it to the public. We don’t put an ad in the paper and say “come to [Jessica’s] place”. (emphasis added).

The sense of maintaining the ‘safety’ of the group was paramount, and given some of the negative experience members reported with other groups, this approach for ensuring the cohesiveness of this group is understandable. It does raise an important point with regard the operation of the baby group however; the baby group, if to function as an effective core discussion network, must have at its core a foundation of trust, empathy and respect. Although being ‘in a bubble’ was cautiously noted and ultimately justified as something positive, it emerged from this conversation that protection of the interpersonal dynamics and maintenance of feelings of trust within the group were central to the group’s success. It was however also noted that this same dynamic of restricting the group’s reach and membership held the potential for isolating the group; a theme that is worthy of further investigation.

**Discussion: Future developments and a research agenda for the *baby group***

As noted above, baby groups remain under-explored and under-theorised communities of practice and sites of knowledge production on parenting. Opportunities exist to explore how these groups function according to dominant expectations around parenting and how problematic aspects of contemporary parenting—namely isolation, and the effective provision of support and care—might be considered and countered in terms of the baby group.

In general, the literature summarises the central features of the baby group around themes of *support*, the *experience* and *knowledge* gained from the group as a *community of practice*, and the dynamics of the group’s *formation and* *structure*. These themes were also apparent in discussions with the group engaged as part of the ethnography reported in this paper. Associated themes including *sociability and friendship*, and *gender* *and femininity* were also discernible from discussions with the group. It is with this set of themes that definitional markers for theorising the typology of the baby group emerge, with the most prominent marker of the informally constituted group as discussed here corresponding with the ‘organic’ formation it supported. Although a more extensive survey of the nature of this group’s conduct and the experience of its members in defining a ‘place’ within the group and, how the group’s membership was organised according to perceived relative expertise on different aspects of parenting might provide useful prompts for further inquiry, it remains that the organic organisation of these groups stands as a major point of distinction to other, institutionally mandated, and formally organised baby groups.

In this regard, a wider research agenda exploring the baby group might examine the following areas of focus:

i) *The exploration of the baby group as a therapeutic network of support*. Within this, the dimensions of the baby group as a core discussion network might be charted to determine how the affective connections between members function as mechanisms of comparison and validation of parenting style.

ii) *The exploration of the baby group as a community of practice*. Within this, the roles that members of the group assume according to the attribution of expertise and knowledge might be charted to uncover how modes of leadership and association function as core aspects of the organisationof the baby group.

iii) *The exploration of how learning is mediated via the group*. Within this, the functioning of the group as a site of ‘public pedagogy’ might be explored in order to understand how these groups both mediate dominant cultural knowledges on parenting, motherhood and femininity as well as produce their own ways of knowing.

In conjunction with this, projects exploring the identity characteristics of baby groups, and how groups function with diverse member identities, and indeed, how men associate with or form their own groups are also needed. Extending work undertaken by Lareau (2002), Brusdal and Frønes (2003) and Vincent and Ball (2006, 2007), further consideration of the role of social class, and in particular the ‘aesthetic’ dimensions of cultural capital and the role that ‘choice’ plays in defining both parenting and childhoods, and by extension the formation and function of baby groups in different socio-cultural contexts might also be undertaken. Prominent within this might be the study of the use of time, the availability of resources (economic and cultural) to shape children’s experiences and the influence that social networks play in establishing parent’s and children’s educative, leisure and socio-economic opportunities. This work would further uncover the dynamics that mark the operation of baby groups in different contexts, and draw a focus specifically on the ways that parents in a range of settings go about defining their own social learning systems.

The significance of the baby group should be understood in terms of the central role these groups have in supporting parents to be effective in their parenting. That parenting holds such a centrally significant, yet closely scrutinised and surveilled place in human cultures, emphasises the need for greater understanding of the ways that parents go about enacting practices of parenting, and in particular, do so as part of wider networks. The baby group as a community of practice functions as a site of knowledge-in-formation, and carries potential for the formation of versions of parenting that challenge and problematise dominant and normative (popular) accounts of parenting. Understanding how baby groups might function to best provide effective support and ultimately, define models of parenting that work for their participants is hence of significant value.

**Notes**

1 Within, at least, the media saturated landscapes of the Western world. Television programs such as *Extreme Guide to Parenting* (Bravo, United States), *World’s Strictest Parents* (BBC Three, United Kingdom) and *Super Nanny* (Channel 4, United Kingdom) offer prime examples of the focus parenting receives in popular culture.

2 One thinks here of the thematic trope of the not-so-good parent encapsulated by archetypal television programs including *Roseanne* (ABC) and *The Simpsons* (Fox), but also ‘reality’ television portrayals such as those captured in *Dance Moms* (Lifetime), *Living Lohan* (E!) and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* (E!). In the case of the former examples however, the point of interest lies in how well these seemingly far-from-perfect parents actually perform as parents.

3The literature of the parenting ‘self-help’ genre provides a useful indication of this point. Notable works in this field include Steve Biddulph’s *Raising Boys* and Michael Carr-Gregg and Elly Robinson’s *The Princess Bitchface Syndrome 2.0*.

4It is noted here that the field of leisure studies has its own distinct body of work relating to the leisure activities of parents, and from which discussion of baby groups is present. Within this journal, Mulcahy, Parry, Glover’s (2010) article “Play-group politics” provides a notable example. The journal also covers papers that examine the leisure activities of new parents, with papers by O’Brien, Lloyd and Riot (2017), Craig and Mullin (2012), Irving and Giles (2011) and Beck and Arnold (2009) providing examples.

5In applying these designations, I borrow loosely from the literature on ‘organic organisations’ outlined by Morand (1995), whereby the organically constituted organisation is one based on ‘loose, spontaneous, more casual social intercourse and comportment’ (p. 831) in which the ‘informality’ of the group’s structure and organisation is core to its functioning.

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