

Motherhood Unmasked

A community arts based approach to valuing mothers and mothering



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Context: Mothering

We live in a society in which our ideologies and policies do not value caring generally or mothering specifically (e.g., healthcare, workplace flexibility, parental leave, childcare, inadequate support for single parents, those with a disability)

We are surrounded by images and messages about mothers and mothering in our every day lives. In the media, social media, advertising, through the services we access (particularly health and medical), books and advice we read and via our families and other mothers. Whether we realise it or not we are constantly navigating ideals, norms and practices around mothering.

The way Mums and mothering are depicted sends strong messages to us about what it is to be a 'good mother' and to raise 'good children'. Most often, what we see represented is a highly romanticised view of mothering (where mothers are still expected to devote all their attention to their child(ren) and love every minute of it'). A standard of which is impossible to achieve.

Capitalism and economic rationalism mean that parenting, pregnancy and childhood are heavily commercialised

Public discourse has relegated the subject of parenting to the realms of personal choice and private responsibility (individual choice).

There is a culture of 'mother blame' and consequential 'mother guilt' fuelled by narrow, negative stereotypes of 'bad' mothers and at the other extreme impossibly high standards of being a perfect or 'good mother'

The media (social media) pitches mothers against each other (e.g., breast versus bottle, working versus stay at home etc) in so called 'mommy wars'

Context: Mothering

- While having children can bring immense joy and fulfillment, it can be also one of the most vulnerable and isolating times in a woman's life.
- Caring for young children can be frustrating, isolating – and a 24/7 job and there are increasing unrealistic expectations of parents, particularly mothers, which magnifies existing stressors.
- At the same time social isolation is an increasing issue for many mothers, with financial pressures, workforce demands and increasingly families living further apart which mean that many parents lack the support they need.
- Single mothers, those with a disability, mothers who have had fertility issues, those in LGBTI families, those with mental health issues and mothers who come from culturally diverse backgrounds face additional challenges
- While there is a growing awareness of the need for supporting mothers (particularly new mothers) there remains a gap in locally delivered, non-judgmental supports that offer women the opportunity to come together and share their experiences.

Aims of the session

- Consider mothers experiences of oppression and possibilities for empowerment
- Impacts on individuals, families and children when people mother, particularly from the margins
- Foreground mothers' experiences voices and agency
- Highlight the role of broader structural factors that impact on mothers experiences
- Support mothers identity while ensuring they aren't solely defined as mothers

Project background

Founded in 2009 as a community arts projects

Aimed at engaging new mothers within local communities

Designed for mothers to engage in arts based activities to express and share their experiences of being mothers.

Involves a series of structured workshops, culminating in a community exhibition (for mothers day)

Aims to value the roles and experiences of mothers, both at an individual and broader social level.

A partnership with mothers and community stakeholders

MUM is now in its 7th year of operation and also has an emerging online platform for sharing women's stories of mothering and creatively engaging with experiences as Mums

Evaluation an important component of the project

Context: Community Arts

*By displaying artwork that depicts and values the experiences and perspectives of mums, art acts as a vehicle for diffusing attitudes which value mums and their roles in the community
(Dunphy, 2013)*



Workshop Structure

Safe space created & art materials supplied

Workshops Format (2-3hrs, 6-10 workshops per program)

Pop Up workshops

-Welcome, reflection on previous week and introduction to theme

-Activity time

-Reflection

-Feedback

Workshop topics

Masks of Motherhood

My Nest

Messages of Motherhood

Joys and Challenges

A focus on technique (still life, clay, portraits)

Self Portraits

Letter writing

Wrap Up and Messages to Mothers

Exhibition

- Showcase mothers art and foreground their experiences
- Engagement of family/friends
- Broader valuing of motherhood
- Changing / challenging attitudes around mothering



So Far....

- 4 community projects
- 32 participants
- Over 200 community members attending exhibitions
- Exhibition opening and display
- Supporting participation
- Partnerships
- Funding
- One online campaign "A Month of Mothering" through Instagram



Participant outcomes: Exploring thoughts and emotions

I liked being able to externalise some of the internal stuff, create something out of what I was feeling but hadn't really talked about, the process was good and sometimes for me it wasn't always a happy experience so it was a good chance to release it...

*

Being able to reconnect with your own thoughts ...you are so busy dealing with day to day stuff to reflect there's just not enough time in the day really

*

For me it was quite challenging, there were a lot of feelings and thoughts I didn't even know that I had until I started thinking about it or the question or opportunity was raised.

*

Never in my entire mothering experience have I sat down and discussed at this level....there's no real platform for it so it was a really good chance to sit down and start the conversation



Participant outcomes: Social connection and mutual support

It's been a great opportunity to meet other mothers within the shire, to share experiences of motherhood and support each other. The workshops have extended to informal get togethers at each others homes and I really look forward to these evenings.

*

The process has been good just to be validated and to hear others experiences and I've learned a lot from some of the other women here and it's been a good chance to get to meet some new people...

*

Having kids, you think making friends is easy but I think (by participating in MUM) we've all learnt that a lot about each other and ourselves and you become more open and transparent

*

...to be able to come and do something for me, you actually get to breath, like yourself gets to come out or something and that doesn't happen often...



Valuing Mothers and Mothering



This is me.
I am round.
I am wobbly.
I am strong.
I grew babies.

We're just expected to do what we do and that's how it is whereas when someone works then they create something and there's value put to that whereas what we do is keeping a household, keeping children happy, fed, on time, all those million and one things we have to do....I think this process made it more visible, I hope so.

*

Personally, I think it helped my partner to realise that when I get a break it actually helps the rest of the family....I'd come home happy and enthusiastic on Wednesdays...he's said you know you should find something else to do on a Wednesday now....

*

I think it was successful in valuing Mum's...I overheard a conversation at the opening where people were saying seeing the different pieces, variations on the same topic they were able to get a good idea of experiences, it let people start having a discussion about it....

*

You realise too that Mum's do so much caring for the community whether it is volunteer work or looking after a friend or a partner or whatever...by nature we give a lot and there's not a lot given back.

Community Outcomes

- Increased valuing of the lived experiences of mothers (valuing individual mothers involved and mothers in general)
- Increase of mothers' access to community venues and spaces
- Increased awareness of the needs and experiences of mothers by local organisations
- Changing / challenging attitudes about the role, value and experiences of mothers
- Challenging stereotypes of mothering and providing perspectives of the lived experience of mothers
- Highlighting the strength and resilience of mothers
- Increased social connections locally



Dilemmas and (R)evolutions

- Facilitator/participant role
- Therapeutic but not therapy
- Children or no children
- Quality of the art versus the process
- Level of change
- Ensuring inclusive and accessible
- Ensuring safe spaces and support outside group (if required)
- Numbers, numbers, numbers
- Sustainability



Final Word....

- Mothers remain undervalued individually and socially in all communities
- Important for approaches that focus on mothers for themselves not 'for the sake of the children or families'
- Non-judgemental, safe spaces for mothers are important
- Raising awareness of the social construction of mothering and its impact on the experiences of mothers is key
- Role of community arts for self expression, social connection and attitude change



Responding to the Experiences of Mothers

- At a personal, professional or political level, **what aspect of the project (and what mothers have shared) stands out for you and why?** It may be an individual art work, some aspect of a mothers experience or a component of the project itself.
- As practitioners, academics, artists, women and mothers, **how do we work in a way that values the experience of mothers?**



With Thanks...



APS Women and Psychology Interest Group for sponsoring today's exhibition.

pocket prints

PocketPrints App for sponsoring images from the Instagram campaign #AMonthOfMothering