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YOUNG MOTHERS IN AUSTRALIA: PRIORITISING MOTHERHOOD AND RESISTING STEREOTYPES

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NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY

Young mothers are often faced with challenges and obstacles that older mothers may not come up against. They frequently report experiences of discrimination, stereotyping, and economic disadvantage. In this research we explore the experiences of young motherhood as reported by a group of young mothers in South-East Queensland who all had at least one child under the age of one. We talked to them about their experiences, goals, and aspirations.

In Australia, the majority of structured support programs are focused on engaging young mothers with further education (e.g., finishing High School or obtaining post-secondary qualifications) or supporting their return to paid employment. However, we find that the young mothers in our study prioritised their roles as mothers and were focused on providing full-time care to their children. Education and employment were seen to be secondary longer-term priorities. We found that parenthood is a catalyst for transitioning to more rewarding employment, but this is secondary to their goal of motherhood. We found strong evidence that young mothers actively resist stereotypes and challenges that are placed upon them as young mothers.

Our findings highlight the need for support programs that accommodate the individual needs of young mothers and will likely be more successful if young mothers' goals and aspirations are incorporated. We also suggest that longitudinal research will offer even more insight into the experiences of young mothers beyond the early years of their children's lives.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines young women's experiences of early motherhood focusing on their aims and goals for the future. Young mothers face a particularly complex set of life circumstances by virtue of entering parenthood outside the normative age of motherhood and are likely to experience discrimination, stereotyping and economic disadvantage. We report data from a small-scale qualitative study designed to gather evidence about the experiences, goals and aspirations of young mothers. While the main programs supporting young mothers in Australia focus on education and employment support, we find that young mothers prioritise mothering and focus on the importance of providing full-time care to their children. We find evidence that parenthood is a catalyst for transitioning to more rewarding employment, but this is a secondary goal after motherhood priorities. We also find evidence of active resistance to stereotyping and the challenges these women face as they navigate motherhood outside the standard normative age for this transition. Our findings highlight the need for longitudinal work that can provide evidence of heterogeneity in outcomes, support programs that cater for heterogenous experiences and needs and greater recognition of the value of unpaid mothering and care work.

1. Introduction

There is widespread evidence that Australian women are delaying entry to motherhood. (Qu, 2021). Compared to a generation ago, women who have their first child below the age of 25 are increasingly unusual and at-risk of social disadvantage, stigma and alienation. This is particularly the case if the birth takes place outside of a stable, long-term heterosexual partnership. Several studies have documented the negative experiences of young mothers who report discrimination from health care providers and teachers, and alienation from friends and family (Brand et al., 2015; Breheny and Stephens, 2007; Ellis-Sloan, 2014; Shea et al., 2016; Yardley, 2008). These experiences coincide with the usual challenges of becoming a mother – lack of sleep, anxiety, time scarcity, health concerns, financial pressures, employment changes – potentially making early parenthood a very challenging and stressful time for women. On the other hand, there is evidence that for some young women becoming a mother can be an empowering and life-changing event, despite the many new challenges it brings (Duncan, 2007; Edin and Kefalas, 2011; McDermott and Graham, 2005). And studies have also found high levels of agency, resilience and strong coping strategies amongst young mothers (Lee and Gramotnev, 2006; Sniekers and van den Brink, 2018). This research point to the importance of examining heterogeneity in the experiences of young mothers and the need for a deeper understanding of associations between early parenting and social disadvantage.

Lee and Gramotnev (2006) argue that it is not parenthood itself that leads to social disadvantage for young women, but rather women who become young mothers are already on a pathway to disadvantage prior to parenthood. Similarly, Kalucza, Lam and Baxter (2021) show that variations in levels of education and employment precarity prior to parenting are strongly related to trajectories after birth. They find that women who become young mothers have higher levels of precarity prior to birth than their peers who do not become mothers. But amongst those who do have a child before turning 25, women on more advantaged pathways experience deeper precarity after the birth than women who were already on precarious pathways. While not quite evidence of a transformative effect, these results show that contrary to assumptions, becoming a young mother may not further entrench social disadvantage.

In this paper we examine young women's experiences of early motherhood focusing on their aims and goals for the future. We add to previous studies that have primarily relied on large-scale quantitative surveys by using data from focus groups and one-on-one interviews with a group of young mothers attending a Young Parenting Program in Southeast Queensland, Australia. Our aim is to help build an evidence base about young mothers that may inform further research and assist community and

government agencies developing programs to support young mothers. We believe that young mothers face a particularly complex set of life circumstances by virtue of entering parenthood outside the normative age of motherhood. Motherhood experienced outside normative age parameters is typically seen as ill-planned and risky for both the child and the mother. By reporting on the life stories and experiences of young mothers we add to understanding of the diversity of pathways into young motherhood, the heterogeneity of experiences and outcomes and provide useful information for future policies and programs designed to support young women through a critical life course stage.

1.1 Experiences of mothering

Intensive mothering, most notably described by Sharon Hays in her 1996 book *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, describes the expectation that mothers are the central and primary caregivers to their children. Intensive mothering is characterised by notions that child rearing "is time-intensive, guided by experts, and emotionally engrossing" (Christopher, 2012: 75). In this context, being a mother is expected to be the primary focus of women with young children who are expected to be the primary carer responsible for the day-to-day needs of children including physical, emotional, social and educational care.

But the intensification of mothering has coincided with women's increased participation in employment (Craig, Powell and Smyth, 2014). Most Australian couples are now dual-earners with both partners participating in paid employment (ABS, 2020; Qu, 2020), adding new challenges to childcare arrangements and increasing stress and time pressure for parents, and particularly mothers (Ruppanner, Perales and Baxter, 2019). Studies of women's time use show that women consistently spend more time on caregiving and domestic work compared to men and that women manage these demands by working part-time and foregoing leisure (Bianchi et al., 2000; Craig, 2006). The result is an increasing toll on women's time pressure and mental health. The most common outcomes for women who both parent and participate in paid employment are long hours, time pressure, low quality sleep and poor mental health (Ruppanner, Perales, Baxter, 2019; Strazdins, et.al. 2016; Venn and Strazdins, 2017). At the same time, there is research that shows parental employment characteristics, such as mother's longer work hours, are associated with greater child behavioural problems (Lam, O'Flaherty, Baxter, 2018).

Intensive mothering is only feasible for mothers who have the resources, social support and financial security to engage exclusively in mothering. Single mothers, or young mothers without long-term established partnerships, are less likely to be in such a position and may therefore suffer feelings of

inadequacy or guilt if they cannot live up to normative images of good mothering practices. Moreover, marginalised mothers such as young mothers are subject to stigma and negativity from damaging discourses, discrimination by health care providers and exclusion from support groups typically aimed at older mothers (Ellis-Sloan, 2014). Motherhood in young women is not typically celebrated nor is it accepted as a socially viable trajectory with a number of studies providing evidence that young mothers experience considerable discrimination and stigma (Anwar and Stanistreet, 2015; Brand, Morrison and Down, 2015; Ellis-Sloan, 2014; Shea, Bryant and Wendy, 2016). Moreover, young mothers in Australia, are one of the groups identified by the government as at risk of long-term welfare dependence and in need of dedicated programs and interventions to support their employment trajectories (Department of Social Services, 2016). Such programs may exacerbate perceptions of marginality and vulnerability adding to increased perceptions of stigma and stereotyping.

One study identified four dominant themes in the discourse on teenage mothers in the medical and health literature: as a disease, as expensive, as resisting mainstream culture and as reproducing disadvantage through reproduction (Breheny and Stephens, 2010). As others have noted, such discourses shape not only how health professionals respond to young mothers, but also the views of other agencies, governments, communities and families (Brand, Morrison and Down, 2015; Sniekers and van den Brink, 2018). But how do they influence the experiences of young mothers themselves? There is some evidence that women actively resist stigma and stereotyping. Shea, Bryant, and Wendt (2015) for example, report that young mothers in their study displayed this resistance by asserting pride in motherhood through their parenting abilities and their children, emphasising a strong sense of agency, autonomy, purpose and meaning, and highlighting their resilience and ability to overcome challenges.

There is also evidence that some young women experience motherhood as a transformative and life-changing event that enables them to re-evaluate their life aims and strive toward new goals (Brand, Morrison & Down, 2015; Edin and Kefalas, 2011; McDermott and Graham, 2005; SmithBattle, 2006). Variations in context and experiences may contribute to some of the heterogeneity in young women's experiences. For example, women who are already on a disadvantaged trajectory with limited resources and support may find motherhood opens new opportunities for connections, support and mentoring, while women who are more advantaged may find that early motherhood closes off some previously open doors and restricts their opportunities. Edin and Kefalas' (2005) work also points to the emotional security and love of their child that supports young mothers who in other relationships might have experienced considerable instability and turmoil.

Using data from the Australian Longitudinal Study of Women's Health, Lee and Gramotnev (2016) examine predictors and outcomes of early motherhood to examine whether Australian women who become mothers at a relatively early age (in their early 20s) already have substantial disadvantages and whether early motherhood leads to poorer health, emotional distress, reduced engagement with the workforce, or reduced financial security. They find that young mothers tend to be partnered or married, live in rural areas, have low levels of education and to be out of the workforce. They also tend to behave in more risky ways around health and social behaviours in comparison to older mothers. Surprisingly though young mothers reported lower levels of stress than older mothers. Notably Lee and Gramotnev find that when pre-existing social disadvantage is controlled, there is no evidence of further disadvantage following young motherhood. They conclude that women who experience disadvantage are at increased risk of early motherhood, but early motherhood does not substantially increase their level of disadvantage beyond that which already exists (2020: 41).

Other more recent Australian studies using different data have also shown heterogeneity of outcomes that challenge our stereotypical assumptions about experiences of motherhood. Hoffmann and colleagues (2020) examine data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children and show that young mothers (defined as those giving birth between 15 and 24 years of age) have much higher levels of social and family support than older mothers. Older mothers on the other hand have higher levels of material and personal resources but less social support from families and friends.

Kalucza and colleagues (2021) use longitudinal data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey and a novel sequence matching technique to compare education and employment trajectories of young women 3 years prior to and 3 years following a birth. They report that women who become young mothers (prior to age 25) have higher levels of precarity in their trajectories before becoming parents, supporting Lee and Gramotnev's suggestion of social disadvantage selecting disadvantaged women into early motherhood. Kalucza et. al. (2021) also show that mothers with the least precarious trajectories prior to parenthood experience an *increase* in labour market and education precarity, whereas young women already on precarious paths experience a *decrease* in precarity over time.

1.2 Current Policies and Programs for Young Mothers in Australia

Many programs and services designed to support young mothers in Australia focus primarily on education and employment goals and pay much less attention to motherhood skills (Hoffmann and Vidal, 2017).

Similar to the UK and the US, these programs tend to be paternalistic in nature, ceasing welfare payments when the youngest child is in school, or tying welfare payments to participation in education (Hoffmann and Vidal, 2017). For example, ParentsNext is a program currently administered by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment to support parents with children under 6 years to plan and prepare for their future employment, with the idea that the parents will be ready for employment by the time their youngest child is in school (Department of Jobs and Small Business, 2018). Activities supported by ParentsNext include help finding training programs, resume writing, and job interview practice. ParentsNext also offers further referrals to support services. ParentsNext incentivises participants to attend their activities through financial penalties applied to their Parenting Payments after failure to attend. The evaluation of the compulsory phase of ParentsNext generally showed an increase in planning for and participation in employment and education. Parents could enrol voluntarily if they met certain criteria similar to the compulsory parents, although this was rarely taken up (Department of Jobs and Small Business, 2018).

With the exception of ParentsNext, there is no overarching social program aimed at young parents at either the Federal or State level. Rather, support programs are hyper-local and vary in characteristics and accessibility. Support programs can be broadly placed into 5 categories: *Social* (playgroups or social activities), *school-based* (child-care in school), *parenting skills* (home visits or regular meetings), *future focused* (goals, education, and work oriented), and *intensive* (case management and supported housing). There is often some crossover of categories within programs, but none encompasses all categories. While this list suggests a wide variety of program types, many states have limited access and availability of programs vary widely across regions. Further, information about the programs are not readily available. After a rudimentary internet search, the most comprehensive source of information on State and Federal programs is a website maintained by The Australian Young, Pregnant, and Parenting Network, which is comprised of "health care providers, educators, social workers and community members (AYPPN, 2021). This website details government and local programs in each state and territory of Australia.

In sum, previous studies challenge stereotypical assumptions about the relationship between early parenthood and social disadvantage. There is evidence that social disadvantage precedes early motherhood and that motherhood itself is not necessarily a catalyst for deeper disadvantage. This indicates a need to intervene prior to motherhood if we want to improve outcomes for this group. Further, a review of current policies and programs also highlights the need for further evidence to support evaluation of existing programs and potentially development of new ones that support young women to

develop parenting skills and wellbeing, rather than just focusing on education and employment. Existing findings also points to heterogeneity in experiences and the need to understand variations in experiences and outcomes of parenthood across different social groups. This implies that policies and programs designed to support young mothers will be most successful if tailored to fit the needs of specific women in context. This adds considerable complexity. It also further highlights the need to include the voices of women themselves when designing support programs.

2. Methods

To investigate the experiences of young parenthood and to gather evidence about their aspirations and priorities, we developed a collaborative research project titled "Pathways to Parenthood" with Wesley Mission Queensland, and a Young Parenting Program (YPP). The YPP is a not-for-profit organisation located in Southeast Queensland that delivers pregnancy and parenting education classes to young parents, aged under 25 years. Extra support was available to parents aged 19 and under, such as referrals, transportation, general information and advice, and access to some amenities (for example showers and clothes washing machines). The research aimed to understand the lived experiences of the young parents who participated in the pregnancy and parenting classes, and to learn about their aspirations and goals in parenting, education and employment and the challenges they faced as young parents.

Young parents enrolled in the YPP classes were informed of the study by the YPP staff prior to a scheduled visit by the researchers. The final sample was 15 respondents, some of whom participated in focus groups and 10 of whom consented to one-on-one interviews. Three of these interviews were conducted as follow-ups approximately 13 months after the first interviews. The focus groups were conducted at the YPP facilities before or after the scheduled information session. The interviews were primarily conducted over the phone, with 2 occurring face-to-face at the YPP premises. All of the mothers in our sample could be characterised as low socio-economic status and most were partnered, often with the father of their child/ren.

The interviews were all semi-structured in nature, with a guiding questionnaire but ample freedom to explore threads of conversation as needed. The resulting transcripts were analysed through a modified thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke 2006). We focused on selectively coding for themes around mothering, work, study, identity and aspirations. In a previous publication we have reported results from these data on family histories and access to social support (see Hoffmann et al. 2020). Our present aim is

to explore understandings and perspectives about work, study and parenting goals. We also highlight insights into their presentation of self and how they resisted stereotypes of disadvantage.

Table 1: Characteristics of interview participants

Name	Pregnant/ Parenting	Age	Marital Status	Highest Grade of School
Brooke ***	Pregnant and Parenting	17	Married to children's father	Year 9
Christabel ***	Parenting	20	Partnered with child's father	Year 11
Quinn **	Parenting	18	Partnered (not child's father)	Year 11
Lindy **	Pregnant	19	Partnered with child's father	Year 12
Meghan ***	Parenting	25	Partnered with child's father	Year 12
Samantha*	Parenting	21	Partnered with child's father	Year 6
Nadia **	Parenting	21	Partnered with child's father	Year 10
Lauren ***	Pregnant	19	Partnered with child's father	Year 12
Kora *	Pregnant	20	Single	Year 10
Delilah *	Parenting	17[†]	Partnered with child's father[†]	Year 11
Ellen *	Parenting and Pregnant	18[†]	Partnered with father of second child	--
Danielle *	Parenting and Pregnant	18[†]	Partnered with father of children [†]	Year 11[†]
Gemma *	Parenting	24[†]	Single (recently separated from child's father)	--
Pippa *	Parenting	18[†]	Partnered with child's father	Year 10
Esther *	Parenting	17[†]	Single[†]	Year 11

Notes: Pathways to Parenthood (P2P), 2017/2018. All names are pseudonyms. * One star denotes that participant attended a focus group only. ** Two stars denotes that participant attended an interview only. *** Three stars denotes that participant attended both focus group and interview. The eldest child of all participants was aged 1 year old or under. [†] Information was inferred from the interview data as formal demographics were not collected during Focus Group 4.

3. Findings

3.1 Motherhood as Priority

Not surprisingly, education and employment goals took second place to the immediate needs of learning how to be a mother for the young women in our study. Being a good parent was the priority goal and of most immediate concern to these young women. The mothers talked about their children with pride and affection and described becoming mothers as enormously positive and inspiring. They spoke of being fortunate to be mothers to their children, and how much they enjoy just watching them grow and develop. The mothers were keen to spend time with their children while they were very young and expressed desires to delay returning to, or looking for, work, further education, or using childcare. The mothers often mentioned not wanting to use childcare until their children were "mobile" or around 12 months old.

One young mother described a desire to have more children and to delay education and employment until they had completed childbearing with the aim to focus on their work and careers once their children were older.

> So yeah, I've wanted to go back and finish that course, but then I thought, "I've already had a kid. I'm already doing the baby thing. I might as well just, yeah, have the next baby." Because I just want to get it over and done with and then I never have to be out of that routine again. Then I can just focus on my career, and getting a job. (Ellen, 18)

At the same time however, education and employment were never far from their minds and some had well-developed plans for employment in the longer-term. Few of the mothers in this study expressed a desire to remain out of paid work for an extended period of time. This is likely partly due to financial needs. The luxury of extended maternity leave was largely unavailable to them due to their employment circumstances and none were in jobs that provided paid maternity leave.

As the young women took on their new roles of parent, in some cases unexpectedly, there was also evidence that priorities around education and employment had shifted. We found pregnancy sometimes provided an impetus for young mothers to change direction in a number of ways, including their work and career plans. Many of the young mothers in this study had left their previous jobs during their pregnancy and expressed doubts about returning to their job. Reasons for leaving work were often linked to physically demanding work conditions that were unsustainable during pregnancy. For example, Brooke described "*working with bleaches, and walking up flights of stairs every 10 minutes...while pregnant, was*

a bit too hard." Samantha (21) left her job as a hairdresser, saying "*I got so sick I just couldn't do [my job] as well. So I dropped it.*" Another two young mothers who were hairdressers also found it difficult to keep working while pregnant. Christabel (20) also left her job mid-way through her pregnancy. She worked in hospitality and said, *"…that wasn't the best of industries to be in while pregnant. So I stopped working that at 19 weeks.*"

The young mothers in our study were usually employed as casual workers in physically demanding roles that required them to stand for long hours. Some experienced health complications or other difficulties during pregnancy that prevented them from working late into their pregnancy. Many of the young women were in highly precarious and physically demanding jobs that had been manageable prior to pregnancy. But pregnancy had forced them to re-evaluate and there was both greater awareness of, and greater need for, less physically demanding jobs and more flexible employment in the future. Rather than 'balancing' work and family, an assumption inherent in much of the discourse around motherhood, our cohort of young mothers had a clear priority of one over the other, at least in the short term. This suggests that policies and programs designed to support young mothers may need to prioritise support around the demands of mothering until women are ready to shift their focus to education and employment opportunities.

3.2 Work and Study Aspirations

The mothers tended to describe their school experiences as difficult, with the majority of the young women having left school prior to completion. Interestingly, and in line with extant literature (Evans, 2004), most of the mothers had left school before they fell pregnant. Nine of the 15 mothers who told us about their schooling had left school before the end of Year 12 and before they had fallen pregnant. Six mothers had fallen pregnant in school and left due to self-described difficulties with staff, peers, and learning while pregnant. At the same time, many of the young mothers in this study had completed multiple TAFE certificates, diplomas, or apprenticeships in a range of service areas such as hairdressing, beauty and hospitality.

We found that many of the young mothers were dissatisfied with their employment prior to parenthood and described aspirations for very different jobs when laying out their longer-term goals. Immediate post-school employment was viewed as short-term and temporary as a way of entering the labour market, with most assuming they would change employment relatively quickly. Some of the mothers spoke to us about planning to go to university, however their motivations and plans varied. They ranged from a broad

and vague idea of broadening knowledge and assuming university would bring that, to a specific goals for a degree tied to a job (i.e. teaching) and had begun the qualifications that could lead to that (eg. TAFE certificates and Diploma to qualify for university entry). Study was not conceived as something that they *had* to do in an abstract or dutiful sense, as though a degree or certificates would enrich their lives or improve job prospects. Rather the young mothers who expressed an intention to study, had planned the pathway to specific jobs that they wanted, and knew that study that would get them there.

Lindy (19) finished high-school and went into a full-time job at a call centre that she "*absolutely hated*", which led her to leave her job and start her own small business. Lindy made this move prior to falling pregnant, and said, "*I can't work for people for the rest of my life, I want to do my own thing*". She described her business as requiring a low-investment at the beginning and was able to save for it from her full-time wages. Her plans post-pregnancy involved the development and expansion of her business. Another mother, Nadia, had career plans that diverged from her current work (hospitality) saying "*I'm not in a rush to get out but I don't want to stay in it for the rest of my life*", with plans to move toward her desired career in emergency services in the future.

Gemma (24) and Esther (17) both described a strong desire to return to work since having their children. Gemma said she "*miss[ed] it so much*" but hadn't returned yet because she wanted to "*stay at least the first year to spend time with [her daughter]*". Esther similarly said "*I really want to go back to work because I love work*" but did not want to return to the same job she had pre-pregnancy. Both Gemma and Esther's work involved standing for long hours with little or no breaks, however only Gemma described wanting to return to her job as a hairdresser. Gemma's desire to return to work may be linked to her recent relationship dissolution. She described feeling isolated as a stay-at-home-mum, suggesting that work could be a welcome distraction. Many of the young women expressed a plan to return to paid employment, but on their own terms, for example when their child was "*old enough*" and to a job they were satisfied with.

Not all of the mothers planned to find new employment post-pregnancy, with some expressing a desire to return to their previous jobs or industries. Lindy for example, made that choice before she fell pregnant, and pregnancy had strengthened her resolve that her move from secure full-time employment to a more risky, but more fulfilling, small business that she ran out of her home was the right decision. She planned to capitalise on her new career saying, "…*that's all set up for me so that when bub is here I don't have to go to work, and I can get those first few months with him*.".

With the exception of Lindy, none of the mothers had long-term employment plans in place. While they all mentioned longer-term career plans and goals, it was clear that no definite plans had been made and the steps to achieving these goals were recognised as vague and uncertain. For most of the mothers, employment was primarily a way to earn money with the hope that opportunities would arise further down the track for more fulfilling and desired employment. This suggests that programs to support women to make this transition from fulltime mothering to employment, would be beneficial, but again must be timed to coincide with women's readiness to make this transition.

3.3 Resisting Stereotypes

Borrowing the term 'defensive' from Ellis-Sloan (2014), we found examples of the young mothers presenting themselves in defence against pre-empted judgement and perceptions of them framed by the dominant stereotype of young mothers. The women in our sample were acutely aware of stereotypes painted against them, and employment was one way they actively resisted negative ideas of young mothers. In the young mother's presentations of themselves, they first delivered a coherent and bold claim for future plans. One young woman told us she planned to study psychology; another described a construction business she was developing with her husband. As the interviews progressed, and rapport was developed between the interviewers and the group, expressions of uncertainty emerged. Their uncertainty was clear though the words "I don't know". This was often a response to questions about what work or study the young mothers wanted to do:

> And I have no idea what I want to do after. I know I want to go study something. I just don't know what yet. (Danielle)

> I really don't know yet. (Esther)

> I don't think I want to go back. I'm kind of over it. (Samantha)

> I dunno if I want to try something different…I dunno if I want to go back to it (Meghan)

The moments when the young mothers shared their uncertainty with us contrasted with the clear plans they had articulated earlier in our interviews. This suggests that as rapport developed and they felt more comfortable, some doubt about their plans was allowed to come through. This is not to say that the young women do not have clear plans or goals, but perhaps offers insight into their need to present a clear plan for future employment to outsiders, and the uncertainty they live with about their future plans.

Other examples of resisting stereotypes were shown by Brooke who described a reluctance to be idle. "...*I don't like sitting at home, it's not my favourite thing in the world, I want to get out there and do labour work...*". Similarly, Christabel expressed a strong desire not to claim government benefits. However, she could not explain *why*, simply that she did not want to. This points to their awareness of the stigma of welfare benefits and their recognition that they are expected to be in employment if they are to be acknowledged as a productive member of society. Caregiving is not recognised as a productive activity, despite the fact that it is essential labour for reproduction of the next generation. The transition to parenthood provides an impetus to shift away from prior (bad) jobs, although available options likely remain little changed once young mothers are ready to re-enter the labour force. Advocating for better work conditions therefore will benefit young people with caregiving responsibilities, though also likely young Australians generally.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This study aimed to explore the experiences and perceptions of motherhood, study, and work among young Australian mothers. We interviewed 15 young mothers aged from 17 to 25 years in Southeast Queensland and asked them about their experience of motherhood and their goals and aspirations for the future. Many studies have documented the stigma and disadvantage faced by women who become young mothers, although there is increasing recognition of heterogeneous outcomes for young mothers, and evidence that young motherhood can be a catalyst for more positive life decisions and trajectories. Our goal was to talk to young women undergoing the transition to motherhood to gather first-hand insight into their experiences and to improve understanding of the challenges they face. We hope that these insights might be useful to service providers and policy makers who are designing programs to support young mothers.

Although not all of the young women had planned to become mothers at an early age, they nevertheless had embraced motherhood as a priority and we found overwhelming evidence of their joy and fulfilment from motherhood. The fact that they were attending the Young Parenting Program is baseline evidence of their desire to acquire the support and resources available to them to improve their mothering skills. Of course, our sample is not representative of all young mothers and may be biased toward women who were approaching parenting in a positive way. It is likely that young mothers who were experiencing negative emotions and circumstances of mothering may not be attending the service. Nevertheless, our sample was based on women from low socio-economic backgrounds, and at least some were attending

the Young Parenting Program on the advice of their health providers, suggesting that they were considered at-risk of poor experiences and outcomes.

Many of the women described experiences of highly precarious education and employment histories and in some cases, becoming a mother was seen as a circuit breaker for unrewarding employment with plans for more rewarding employment in the future and a better life for themselves and their children. All of the women demonstrated optimism and resilience in the face of uncertainty. But it is unclear whether long-term plans would be realised. Our sample of young mothers may have limited options in the labour market. It was evident from our interviews that few of the women had clear pathways to achieving their longer-term goals. Precarity of circumstances meant that plans could be overturned at any moment, and few had detailed and concrete pathways to realise aspirations. While their aspirations were clear, it is uncertain how many would achieve their goals. Like all caregivers, our young mothers are disadvantaged because care work is devalued. They also face constrained choices in education and employment and there was evidence of few resources and limited means to realise their aspirations. There is a clear need for more longitudinal studies that follow the education and employment pathways of young mothers to understand their outcomes and variations between those who achieve their aspirations compared to those who do not.

Like other studies we found active resistance to stereotypical images of young mothers. The young women in our sample presented positive, agentic, optimistic plans for the future and were careful, at least in the early stages of the interviews, to be clear and confident about their aspirations and goals. Of course, this is not surprising and we are aware that as interviewers we are viewed as outsiders and others who may also hold stereotypical views about them as research subjects. We were conscious of this power balance and endeavoured throughout the interview to share our own experiences as parents and to reduce, as much as possible in an interview situation, the power differentials between us. As the interviews and focus groups proceeded we were aware of the relaxation of some of the image-making and some of the women revealed more of the uncertainty and insecurity of their circumstances. Again, these changes in rapport and resulting data highlighted the need for further longitudinal qualitative studies that are able to negotiate stronger relationships and build greater trust between interviewer and interviewee.

Our study was small-scale and limited by the size of the sample and the cross-sectional design. Due to limited resources and time we were also forced to combine data from a range of interview modes, including one-one interviews and focus groups. It is possible that data collected in focus groups may differ

from data collected from personal interviews, as women in group settings may be less likely to reveal uncertainty or concerns compared to women in one-on-one interviews. Despite these limitations we hope our study contributes to the body of evidence concerning women's experience of young parenting and provides some insights into their aspirations and goals. We believe that our findings emphasise the importance of a variety of support programs for young mothers, and not just programs designed to help them pursue education and employment. While education and employment may be important longer-term goals and very useful for women wanting to transition to less precarious and more rewarding employment, there is also a clear need for programs that support women's desire to prioritise mothering. Policies and programs thus need to be tailored to support women at different stages of the transition to motherhood and to be dynamic and flexible to cater to women's changing needs. Becoming a mother is not a static once-off transition. Women will have a variety of needs as they negotiate their new identity and circumstances. Support programs that are flexible enough to adapt to these changing circumstances, or the availability of a range of different program options to support the variety of needs of young mothers will be most useful and most successful.

Our study shows that young women are resilient and that they exercise agency in a variety of ways, even when they have very limited resources and options. But we also found evidence of limited control over life circumstances and uncertainty about the steps to realising their goals. Social support, from both family and friends, and service agencies, is imperative to enable women to navigate these uncertainties. At a broader level, our research highlights the ongoing need for recognition of the value of unpaid care and mothering work. Of course, this is important for all women and all mothers, but in the case of young women, valuing care more highly may take some of the pressure off and provide opportunities for programs that support care work. Such programs would also help to support those who do not follow standard normative life course pathways and recognise the heterogeneity of experiences of young mothers in Australia today.

5. References

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