

Amanda Norman

MOTHERLAND

The Lived Experiences of New
Mothers Attending Community Groups
in Developing a Sense of Self and
Belonging

Gender Studies

Collection Editor

JAN ETIENNE

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Collection Editor
Dr Jan Etienne



This book is dedicated to Xavier, Pandora, Cassius, and Lola who have taken me on an unimaginable life journey shared with others.

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Abstract

In understanding maternal care beyond the home, this book invites the reader to explore how community groups, from co-operatives to virtual and charitable groups, have shaped and supported the social identity of their members.

It introduces topics about the value of preconception care and listening to new mothers during their lived experiences about having an infant. The history of health and educational care in England grounds the subsequent chapters in their explorations of the professional, as well as community and charitable support offered to new mothers in their transition to parenthood. In the latter chapters, specific examples of community groups specifically for new mothers are included as illustrative examples of the power of the collective's group and social identity in shaping, not only mothers themselves, but also their relationships with each other and their infants.

It contributes to the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) dialogue about families and childhood from birth, with an emphasis on community care.

Key words

Community; belonging; connection; infants; care; relationships; parents; experiences in groups; therapeutic; love

About the author

Dr Amanda Norman is a Senior Lecturer (Childhood Studies) at the University of Winchester, UK. She is the author of *From Conception to Two: Development, Policy and Practice* (2019) and has published works about infant care pedagogies in academic peer reviewed journals and professional practice articles. She has also recently completed a book as sole author on *Historical Perspectives of Infant Care*, with Bloomsbury. Amanda is currently researching spiritual and infant care relationships, from historical and contemporary perspectives. As a trained practising therapeutic play specialist and early years consultant, she continues to support and liaise with early years professionals working in the sector, in addition to her academic role.

Author's message

The book is intended to be an informative guide about connection, understanding, and developing a sense of self in community spaces and places.. The book aims to be the catalyst in either developing your own community space and finding your tribe and reflecting on community spaces with new mothers.

This book aims to develop an understanding of how the collective helps shape a sense of identity for new mothers, as they navigate parenthood. It includes the nexus of past and present through examples to reflect on the power of social identity and the importance of community work in supporting parents and families. There is a specific focus on maternal care and the mother's experience, underpinned by attachment theory.

Note on language

In choosing the terms for the book, I have considered what I think to be the most appropriate and contemporary phrases often found in the literature or when communicating with groups, as well as in policy documents. I have also aligned terms such as community groups and mother circles that are familiar to those working in the UK.

Contents

Introduction		1
Chapter 1	A historical lens to explore the value of mothers' groups	7
	Learning objective: Historical lens on community groups	34
Chapter 2	Creating communities that care: The value of listening to new mothers during their first year as a parent and creating opportunities for support	35
	Learning objective: Listening to new mothers	58
Chapter 3	Mothers' virtual connections and in-person connections: Belonging as a social group and the value of connections	59
	Learning objective: The value of connections and belonging	74
Chapter 4	Contemporary community care: Nurturing narratives between mothers and their infants within an infant massage and singing group	75
	Learning objective: Models of connected community groups	91
Chapter 5	New mothers and circles and spiritual groups	93

Learning objective: Alternative groups as spiritual and social community groups	105
End note What is my position as author and researcher in this book?	107
Recommended discussion topics	112
Case study	114
References	115
Recommended further reading	121
Index	123

Introduction

This book explores the lived experiences of new mothers attending community groups in developing a sense of self and belonging. The book initially considers the value of community groups and why a sense of belonging has the potential to shape and give agency to women's voices. In exploring this, I will be considering bell hooks (1999) and her thinking about sisterhood and solidarity among women, as well as her influence on thinking about love and relationships. Collective identity and feminist psychology will also underpin some of the conceptual understanding about the value of belonging as part of a community group. This initial chapter grounds the subsequent chapters on community groups, focusing on how new mothers have developed as a political, social, emotional, and spiritual movement in the spaces where they come together. Case studies will be included as a way of illustrating lived experiences, and this will be from the author's research and professional as well as personal experiences of being part of different groups, both as a woman and a parent.

By parenting four children and working as an academic, I have had the opportunity to connect my research and personal experiences and the sense of belonging within a new mothers' group, I aim to share this and connect with others. Of course, new mothers' groups do not aim to devalue the roles of partners and fathers in parenting. Rather the book aims to focus on the understudied area of women as mothers within community

groups. The groups catering for parents and infants discussed and shared in the chapters are predominantly attended by women in their role as new mothers. Perhaps in the way parents navigate their experiences at a societal level in England, mothers tend to predominantly attend these groups, without or with their partner. It could be argued that this is inevitable, and although fathers have attended groups on their own with their infants, these tend to be women-dominated spaces, with some groups (women's circles) intentionally clarifying that this is the expectation. I also argue that bringing in fathers' perspectives would widen the discourse and include paradigms about parenting beyond the scope of the chapters and indeed the book. I do however want to emphasise that the father's role is not subordinate to or less significant than the mother's role, especially in today's blended families. Throughout the chapters, I have referred to mothers' groups and parents attending groups because I want to highlight that some of the groups discussed are not exclusive to mothers. When I refer to mothers' groups, this intentionally includes women-only groups as well as attendance only involving women. To remain inclusive, I have also included those identifying as women and mothers when I share examples and acknowledge that I am discussing predominantly women's groups. I have decided to illuminate those identifying as women in their transitioned role as mother because I wanted to share how a sense of connection is created within the various agendas of the groups formed. I have begun with a historical lens on the power of the women's groups and aimed to include examples, perhaps less visible in the mainstream, although no less valuable than the more familiar groups. I have also focused on groups that have been contextualised within England as lived examples,

although the lived experiences and notions of the group could be considered to be parallel to some international experiences of groups. While I wouldn't go as far as to say they are universal, I do consider them to be spaces and places that are found within and beyond England. I begin by sharing a historical lens because I want to include how groups have been formed. Sometimes groups, while often a collective with shared goals, have also been formed by external influences with the objectives imposed and in discord with the members assigned to the group.

Each chapter introduces a lens on topics including personal identity, relationships, and the groups available to new mothers. Within each chapter, questions and practice links are also included to invite further reflections and discussions about specific topics and issues. The practice examples are interwoven with anecdotal contributions.

The overall intention of the book is to give the reader the opportunity to submerge themselves in the world of community life and the value and sense of belonging that can occur through the lived experiences of being connected in a community. The aim is therefore to create a more intimate and subjective understanding of community groups, enabling the reader to delve deeper into understanding lives and questioning present and future social identity and belonging. This book also aims to develop an understanding of how the collective helps shape a sense of identity for new mothers, as they navigate parenthood. It includes the nexus of past and present, through examples to reflect on the power of social identity and the importance of community work in supporting mothers. A specific focus is

on maternal care and the mother's experience, which is also underpinned by attachment theory.

It therefore contributes to the ECEC dialogue about families and childhood from birth, with an emphasis on community care. In recent years, the regular care of infants and young children has been increasingly sought beyond the home. Many parents place their infants into formal daycare settings as they return to work or opt to share their childcare. Subsequently, many settings that traditionally would have cared for and educated children beyond two years have opened their doors and expanded group care, providing 'baby rooms' to enable them to include the care of infants under two within their settings. Therefore, I believe the book is a timely addition to understanding and valuing the autonomy and strength in actively being part of a group and community where there is the time and space for mothers to 'be' with their infant. The book aims to foster among mothers a sense of self and confidence with their infant, rather than the often-conceived thinking of experts that can dominate the early experiences for novice mothers in their vulnerability when caring for their new infant.

In contextualising mothers' groups, an initial broad perspective about how groups have been shaped in the past will be discussed. This will be from the twentieth century and the beginning of hearing women's voices outside mainstream discourses. This will be illustrated with the lived experiences in the case studies presented. Revealing and sharing these lived experiences emphasises the power of the collective voice in national and political change.

What we mean by belonging and creating communities will then be discussed with reference to theoretical concepts and conceptual understanding. This focus then moves swiftly to

the recent past with an oral historical contribution on how mothers were impacted by the pandemic. It focuses on how the nation moved towards virtual landscapes as a way of retaining and connecting new mothers who were physically isolated. In returning to a new normal, a national shift in funding and a focus on groups offered to mothers to enhance a sense of belonging and connectivity are explored. As a facilitator of such groups, I will reflect on my own experiences as a mother, as well as reflecting on the mothers narratives shared about what the group means to them as they embark on baby massage classes. Many new mothers seeking something less commercialised than baby showers but still wanting to celebrate the impending birth and arrival of their baby have found alternative practices with a focus on their spiritual meanings. Women's circles within and beyond the western view of religious practices have culminated in many women seeking and offering mother's blessings and naming ceremonies rather than baptism. The author reflects on her experiences where the community of connection and individual choice are part of the ceremony. In building a mother circle, there is a connection to the earth and thanks to each other, a space to reveal and be accepted in the here and now. This seems an appropriate and timely closing discussion of the groups I will be covering in the chapters that follow.

1

A historical lens to explore the value of mothers' groups

In contextualising mothers' groups, a broad perspective on how groups have been shaped in the past will be provided. This will be from the twentieth century and concerned with women's voices outside the mainstream discourses of the time. It will be illustrated with examples of lived experiences. Revealing and sharing women's lived experiences emphasises the power of the collective voice in national and political change and how groups are shaped and re-formed against the landscape of societal values and beliefs. In making sense of the new mother experience and the value of groups, I want to provide background on how new mothers are perceived and enter into and resist groups in their changing circumstances, sometimes not from their own willingness or desires. However, I have deliberately aimed to reveal the complexities in modern history about new mothers, but also the power of perhaps historically lesser-known groups of women that highlights the shifting discourses that continue to re-shape how we make sense of our experience as new mothers and seek ways of belonging.

Value of community of groups for new mothers

Pregnancy and the post-natal period have often been defined as being key periods in terms of the opportunity that they provide to equalise the life chances of all children. The state of the mother can impact on her capacity for parenting, leading to long-term consequences for her infant.

Care, wellbeing, and support from conception and pregnancy are positive for the infant, as well as the mother, in relation to the capacity to bond with each other when the mother feels emotionally safe and cared for. The risks of vulnerability are reduced and therefore the post-natal negative emotional states associated with this are reduced. With social support available to the mother, the aim is for her to feel good, resilient, and better prepared for the road of motherhood ahead. This can occur from pregnancy with the biological release of oxytocin. When this occurs, the good feeling enhances the bonding experiences. It protects the mother against physical pain, and a successful birthing experience helps mothers to feel supported and cared for. However, for many mothers, a traumatic birth experience can occur and thus rather than oxytocin the release of the stress hormone cortisol can cause further problems with an overwhelming feeling of anxiety. If this continues, then a tense and ongoing struggle to bond during this sensitive time may occur.

While the relationship between parent and infant being affected by mental health can set the trajectory for a child's later life and development, by focusing and targeting support on the ante- and



Figure 1 Love and connections

post-natal periods, there are still opportunities for transformation to occur. Drawing on the well evidenced studies around brain development, including the neuroplasticity of the brain, early intervention in supporting at-risk parents in a preventative model

is an area where community groups can be helpful and support parents. The transition to parenthood offers both risk and hope for child development, and if families are supported holistically from the outset of pregnancy, greater impacts on the physical and mental health of infants' wellbeing can be achieved.

Therefore, services and community programmes and groups perform an essential role in supporting the mother-infant relationship. Different groups and services are available within the community, and these include:

- Universal services (aimed at everyone);
- Universal plus services (for targeted groups); and
- Partnership plus services (aimed at high-risk groups) with specific levels of intervention (Blair and Macauley, 2014).

The focus with regard to new mothers is to provide services that offer a preventative model to ensure the best outcomes for both the infants and the parents. A preventative model can help reduce the risks associated with maternal mental health and poor child health outcomes. Therefore, the priority during early motherhood is how mothers can be supported from conception, within the infant-mother relationship, as well as separately, rather than dealing with concerns about the child only at a later stage.

For many mothers, working outside the home is often romanticised by some feminist activists. However, in the twenty-first century, motherhood is no longer viewed as taking place primarily within the framework of a heterosexual marriage or even a heterosexual relationship. Today, families are constructed in many forms, including with parents of the same sex and with more than two adults sharing the parenting roles. While the focus of this book is on individuals identifying as women in their role

as new mothers, there is no intention to undermine any others involved in parenting roles. Similarly, I have chosen to explore mothers' lived experiences because they align with my own lived experiences and my rationale that it is important to write about motherhood because it remains a relatively unexplored area in feminist theory (Pownal, 2021).

It should also be noted that considering new mothers and the community groups they are involved in is not about romanticising motherhood, by employing the same terminology that suggests women are inherently life-affirming and nurturing feminist activists. Taking this position reinforces the central tenets of patriarchy and male supremacist ideology, implying that a woman's fundamental vocation and purpose is to be a mother. This leads to the argument that if a woman chooses to not be a mother, focusing more exclusively on their career and creative work, they are somehow missing out and fated to live an unfulfilled, emotionally challenged life. Inadvertently it could be argued that not only should women, as mothers, assume the primary responsibility as the parent but in terms of living in relative poverty, they also need to ensure they are financially able to care for children as well, rather than decide not to have children. While women continue to assume sole responsibility for parenting, it is argued that society's propaganda undermines the complex and multi-layered roles mothers undertake. This is beyond the "stay at home or go to work" dichotomy often presented by groups, including women themselves, as a way of improving their circumstances. As bell hooks (1984) writes, female parenting is significant and valuable work which must be recognised as such by everyone in society including feminist

activists. It should receive deserved recognition, praise, and celebration within feminism. Motherhood should neither be a compulsory experience for women nor an exploitative or oppressive one. Effective parenting should be done exclusively by women or in conjunction with men, and fatherhood should have the same meaning and significance as motherhood. Feminist theorists have also emphasised the need for men to share equally in child rearing but are reluctant to cease attaching special value to mothering. This illustrates feminists' willingness to glorify the physiological experience of motherhood as well as their unwillingness to concede that motherhood is an arena of social life in which women can exert power and control. While I have exclusively spoken about new mothers, it is not my intention to perpetuate existing discourses about motherhood, although I do feel that in contemporary society raising awareness of mothers' experiences needs more attention, ensuring both men and women appreciate the significant transition to motherhood. In England, new mothers receive up to nine months' maternity pay if they have been employed and up to a year of (unpaid) leave, in contrast to the government-mandated two-week allowance for the father. While I do not agree with this, it remains a reality and highlights the value society places on the roles of mothers and fathers in caring for their new infant. My justification therefore for writing about women is to focus on experiences in the new mother groups to raise awareness of the significance of community groups and thus signal the importance of this time for parents to be present in the experiences where they can.

According to bell hooks (1984), infants raised in black communities experience a different type of community-based childcare. For

many black women living in poorer communities, there is often not the option to pay for external childcare as they must go out to work, so many rely on other people in their communities to help with childcare. Even in families where the mother remained at home, they would continue to rely on people in the community. This included everyday trips to the park and more freedom for the growing children because there was a sense of shared responsibility and trust in each other in the local community.

For hooks, it is also not about stigmatising parents but emphasising the need for collective parenting to help women, where parenting is delivered by the whole family and supported in the community. This is central to my own thinking about not just how the community is valuable but in what ways and how is it reflected on and experienced as a new mother. What is it about involving the collective group that is different to caring for an individual infant at home?

An example I will draw on to illustrate this further is a group that shifts from the personal to collective in recognising their positions as new mothers, their plight, the roles of their husbands, and that by being part of a group, they are able to influence the political landscape in which they live.

Social identity theory

Perhaps in an unexpected shift, but one that I argue is relevant to understanding groups, I have turned to Henri Tajfel's (1979) greatest contribution to psychology, his theory about social identity theory in understanding the psychology related to the importance of groups. For Tajfel, social identity is an individual's sense of who they are, based on their group memberships. He

proposed that individuals come together for many reasons and that being part of a group is about gaining a sense of pride and self-esteem. Individuals coming together as a group therefore form a social identity and a sense of belonging to the social world. Tajfel considered what motivates individuals to come together and how they then view those who are not part of the group, the differences – or outgroup – and the similarities – the ingroup. An example of this is Twins Trust (UK) and how it has developed since its beginnings as an informal group (McLeod, 2023).

Twins Trust was initiated in a suburban front room in Surrey by Ajibha-Judi Linney, known as Judi, who had come to the UK from South Africa during the apartheid era. Judi was unable to attend university in South Africa (despite passing the entrance exams) because of her colour, so she responded to an advert to come to the UK where she trained to be a nurse and subsequently qualified as a midwife and health visitor. It was when she was seven months pregnant that she found out she was having twins. On the organisation's website, she gives an account of her own experiences as a new mother:

My pregnancy was good and non-eventful until I got to seven and a half months. My feet were starting to swell up and I was very big, so I went into hospital for an x-ray.

I had one of those hospital gowns on for the x-ray, you know the ones that show your behind! I couldn't even do it up as I was so big.

After the x-ray (there were no routine scans back then), I remember hearing my husband's voice, then the doctor's voice who was telling Howard (and not me!)

that we were having twins and that one “did not look very good.”

I shuffled out of the room with bits on show and just remember saying, in disbelief, “twins”? I think I was in shock. I started worrying about money and the fact that my family were no longer nearby to help.

Then I didn't want to get too excited because I was worried about the second smaller baby and think I tried to protect myself a bit.

There were a few sentences in the Bounty book about having twins. But there were no classes, no brochures, very little information on looking after twins. I felt quite alone.

My first baby Zareena, was born and weighted a healthy at 6lb 1oz and the second, Shareen, was delivered by forceps and weighed 4lb 11oz. Both were taken immediately into special care with no opportunity for me to hold them.

The twin girls were OK, but that I was very ill. My blood pressure had skyrocketed and I had a post-eclamptic fit. I was sedated for 2–3 days which was upsetting as didn't see the girls at all, and it was frightening for Howard.

(Twins Trust, 2023)

During this time, she recalled, there was no understanding or support for mothers having multiples.

I was wheeled in to see them after a few days, but there was no encouragement to touch or hold them ... but that's just how it was.

No one I came across had knowledge about caring for twins, which I suppose is when I felt something needed to be done.

For Judi, it was an isolating experience, and again she felt like an outsider trying to come to terms with her experiences as a new mother caring for more than one infant. She described the experience as particularly isolating once her husband went back to work and, with no social media, she aimed to go out into the community. Unable to find a group, she created one herself. She stated that:

Everyone agreed there was not enough information about having twins. I started a plan, I tried to find out where there were Twins clubs, I did some research in libraries, and I wrote letters to various health professionals.

With a couple of other parents of twins, she held a meeting at the NCT headquarters in London (1978) and this was attended by representatives from about 12 existing twins clubs across the country. Today the charity is a flourishing national support network offering online and in-person groups locally and nationally (Twins Trust, 2023).

Tajfel's central hypothesis on social identity theory is that members of an ingroup will seek to compare aspects of an outgroup, thus enhancing their self-image within the ingroup. While this may be applicable to groups such as football teams and cultural, political, class, and religious groups, I wonder if the same could be applied to new mothers' groups. As I progress through the lived experience of new mothers' groups, I am consciously aware

that these groups may not work for all women and that in some groups there may be members who feel disconnected and not part of the shared social identity. I do not want to assume that by including many examples of groups that there is an assumption these groups come together and automatically connect because of the common factor of them each having a new baby (Tajfel et al., 1979). In considering Tajfel's theory, I feel it is helpful to reflect on the processes through which groups are formed and what motivates some women, though not all, to be part of the group they form or join. Furthermore, what happens when the "outgroup" is forced to become a group in its own right but not in a way that is purposefully navigated or led by its members? What if the members do not want to be part of this group? How then do the members experience these feelings, forced into belonging to a group of women defined as new mothers, outside of the societal norms expected of new mothers?

Motherhood, as I am sure all of us agree, is often an intensive and lifelong relationship for women that can have a significant impact on their identity, and the transition culminates in women re-evaluating their autonomy, physical appearance, and work, as well as shifts in understandings about themselves and in relation to others. Women's self-reconstruction also faces the realities of motherhood in juxtaposition to their ideals of motherhood. This is also interesting when thinking about how we would like to parent and the reality of what we can do within the position we exist in. This may be linked to religious norms, poverty, time, and financial security. When women who are mothers do not fulfil their ideal, they often feel guilty or blame themselves for their shortcomings as mothers, even if it is not their own fault, further

compounded by society's ideal view of what a mother is. Since 1918, groups for mothers, such as the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child, have existed. In the aftermath of the First World War (1918), many women found themselves with a child and without a partner to help raise them. Single-parent families received little protection from government, and many faced a life of poverty. Responding to the needs of single parents, the organiser Lettice Fisher, a former social worker and economist, decided to act. She formed the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child in February 1918. In 1930, unmarried mothers also became entitled to receive benefits from the government, as opposed to having to rely on charity or having to access what were previously the workhouses for the poor. However, the stigma of being part of this group has been compared negatively to those who have married, as a married couple would have at least some financial self-sufficiency. Therefore, those who fall outside of what society categorises as being part of new motherhood are then impacted by other women in the communities in which they live, and the beliefs and attitudes of others, as well as themselves, in the circumstances in which they transition to motherhood (Norman, 2022).

Being part of an outgroup in society: The lasting impact on women as new mothers

In England, the cultural context of the mid- to late twentieth century was a relatively stable uniformity of life, evolved around visible rites of passage, a cycle of school, marriage, work, and retirement. These predominant life aims were generational

patterns and provided a moral compass to guide individuals, often complemented by a religious framework for life, in navigating a purpose to their rites of passages. However, as the political and economic climate has shifted, alongside the accelerated use of technology, rites of passage, including marriage and employment, have been met with growing uncertainty and challenge. Employment has become less predictable, and with more consumer freedom and geographical movement, family life has mirrored the change. As one of the oldest and most significant social institutions around the world, families continue to exist but as a social construct evolve and adapt to society's values as these change over time. Women's groups, comprising individuals of varying ages, have developed relationships and been conceived as purposeful ways to build strength, resilience, and moral values for the future support of new mothers.

However, it is also important to remember that some community groups were managed by charities and the state with a central rationale of promoting morality and attitudes that reflected the wider society's outlook about mothers and their babies (Seppälä et al., 2022). Membership of these groups could be enforced, with attendance being made mandatory even though the members might not agree with the objectives set by the organisers of the group. As Tajfel highlights about ingroups, what happens when women who are deemed to be on the margins of society become pregnant?

Every year from 1957 to 1961, London County Council placed approximately 1,000 women into designated mother and baby homes. It was not until the 1970s that a pervasive secrecy about unmarried motherhood, cohabitation, and similar

“irregular” practices, especially among the middle classes, began to change to greater openness. According to Bloom (1995), teenage mothers were not regarded as distinct from older single mothers. Instead, women were divided according to whether it was their first or second pregnancy; those failing to “learn their lesson” were seen as corrupting. However, it was in the late 1950s that government officials argued that teenage mothers should be housed separately, to keep them away from repeat offenders and to enable the government to provide them with schooling and longer-term support. These outgroup members were shunned and encouraged to behave according to society’s values, and motherhood out of wedlock was not deemed to be an acceptable aspect of this society. Another factor in the popularity and increase of mother and baby homes was the influential external drivers leading to changing attitudes about institutional care. During this time, institutional care came to be deemed inappropriate, and it was thought that foundling hospitals and workhouses, as well as group homes run by charities such as Barnardo’s, had had their day and didn’t align with current thinking about child development and child-rearing approaches. Furthermore, as illegitimacy rates rose to high levels in the mid-twentieth century, there was also a strong pull from childless parents wanting to create an aspirational family life and therefore seeking babies to adopt.

During the changing social climate of the 1960s, there was an increase in promiscuity and sexual activity that led to a further increase in fertility rates. Social changes saw a rise in the use of the contraceptive pill, as well as a steady increase in cohabitation. Despite the Abortion Act of 1967, there was still a high incidence