

Young Carers' Experiences of Benefit Finding in the Context of Support Groups

“I think just the whole community of being a young carer is a very nice place to be”.

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INTRODUCTION

Understanding Young Carers (YCs) and their diverse needs remains challenging despite over three decades of research. One key hurdle is the difficulty in defining YCs. The Children and Families Act (2014) employs a legal definition that describes YCs as "a person under 18 who provides or intends to provide care for another person." There are an estimated 120,000 YCs in England (Office for National Statistics, 2023). However, this is likely significantly under-representative due to discrepancies in definitions and age-ranges, limited support services, and social stigma impacting self-identification.

This study provides an insight into the experiences of two YCs participating in support groups designed to facilitate connection. The valuable voice of YCs is lacking in the present literature, and most research within the field focuses on the detrimental impact of caring, presenting the YC experience through a negative lens. The current study contributes to a shift towards positive psychology, promoting the need to tip the balance within the literature to give weight to the positive outcomes. Benefit finding (BF) is a key construct within positive psychology that has been found to lead to increased positive outcomes. This study investigated YC's experiences of BF in social groups designed to help them connect, which has not been explored in previous research.

RESEARCH AIM

The aim of this research project was to explore the experiences of BF amongst YCs in relation to their attendance at support groups.

METHODOLOGY

Design:

- A qualitative research design was used to gain insight into BF experiences of YCs attending support groups.
- From a social constructionist epistemological position, language and discourse were central to meaning-making.
- A reflexive thematic analysis was undertaken, with purposeful awareness of our own social and cultural experiences.

Participants:

- Two female participants, aged 16-years-old, living in the south of England.
- Both participants had attended support groups on several occasions through multiple organisations.
- Both participants had caring responsibilities for multiple family members, including parents.

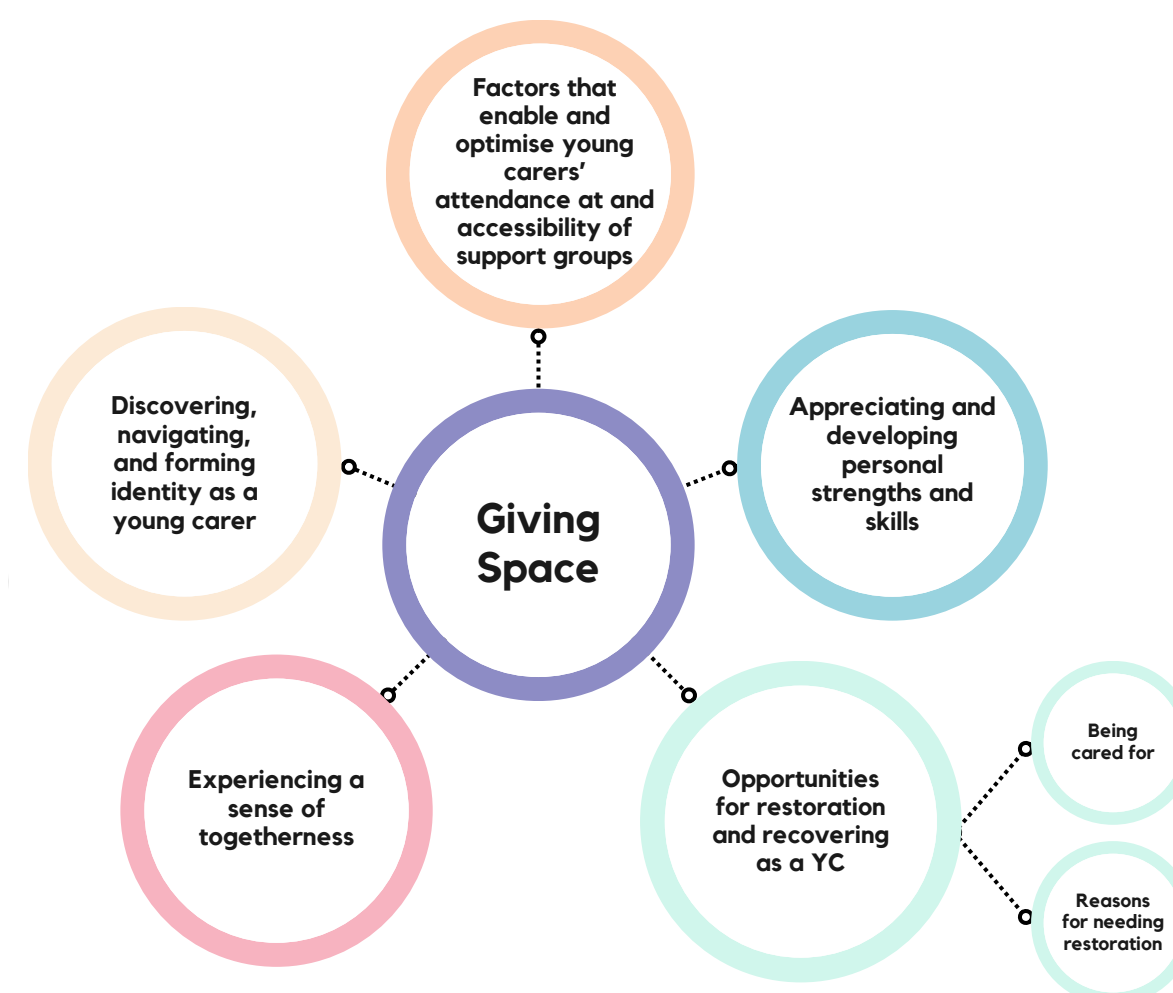
Procedures:

- Data was collected via semi-structured interviews, which lasted approximately 30-40 minutes.
- Interviews were conducted confidentially online by two interviewers.
- Interviews were recorded through Microsoft Teams, and the transcripts were shared with participants.
- We prioritised building rapport to establish trust and promote YC's sense of ease.

Analysis:

- Interview transcripts were analysed collaboratively by all members of the research team, following the procedure of RTA as described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021b, 2022b).
- An inductive approach was taken, focusing on the meaning within the data, whilst acknowledging that we bring our individual and group experiences to the process (Braun & Clarke, 2022a).
- We applied Braun and Clarke's six phases of reflexive thematic analysis, and followed their principle that themes are, "stories we tell about our data".

FINDINGS



- YCs shared factors hindering and promoting their attendance to support groups, including registration process, transport, and care available for their family members.
- Being recognised and labelled as a 'YC' brings self-discovery and identity formation. Support groups help Young Carers to come to terms with their identity, promote acceptance of their status, recognise the benefits, and provide a platform to be heard.
- In support groups, YCs come together and experience a sense of belonging and group connection through their shared experiences and feelings with others their own age.
- YCs often place the needs of others before their own, and so support groups can offer the opportunity for restoration to promote happiness and wellbeing, and being cared for through forming connections with group leaders and finding adaptive ways to manage.
- Support groups enable YCs to connect with other YCs and supportive leaders to enable them to recognise their strengths through reflections with others and through guidance and support to learn new skills in a variety of activities and training opportunities.

“It's the making of memories, the inclusivity, the interaction”.

CRITIQUE

- ✓ A qualitative design enabled us to gather rich, in-depth insights into YC experiences and empower them to voice their BF experiences. As researchers, we used our interactional skills to build rapport with participants and create a safe space in which they could share their views.
- ✓ Qualitative research does not aim to generalise findings (Braun & Clarke, 2021a) or assume homogeneity within a population, making it an appropriate method of gaining Young C's voices.
- ✓ As researchers, we adopted a collaborative approach which enriched the interpretation of the data and theme identification.
- ✓ The current study extends and reinforces the research to offer a UK perspective on BF within YC support groups.
- ✗ Whilst the quality of qualitative research is not determined by sample size (Yardley, 2000), it is possible that the confines of this small-scale project has resulted in themes that are 'thin' (Braun & Clarke, 2021b), leaving little room for them to be expanded.
- ✗ Many YCs may not have had the opportunity to share their perspectives in the current study due to the challenges around being recognised and registered as a YC.
- ✗ BF can be more salient at different times (Lechner et al, 2009), and it is important to recognise that the findings of this study is only a snapshot in time for these YCs.

IMPLICATIONS

- It is important for EPs to raise awareness of this vulnerable group, ensuring they are not a "hidden population."
- EPs can facilitate collaboration, including amongst parents/carers, YCs, health, social care, and educational settings, to identify YCs more effectively.
- Local agreements on YC definitions and collaborative identification processes could enhance YCs' access to support, thus promoting BF.
- This study identified the importance of relationships with group leaders, and the importance of a safe space for YCs to rest and reflect. EPs can support educational settings to creatively facilitate support for YCs through relationships with both adults and peers.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study has unveiled novel themes and bolstered existing research pertaining to BF and YCs. The themes have deepened our insight into how BF can provide support for YCs, and by leveraging their strengths, this research has the potential to bring forth substantial positive impacts on their circumstances, potentially mitigating some adverse consequences associated with their roles as YCs. Although small in scope, our research has shed light on the way in which benefit finding may be encouraged in YC's support groups. We hope it may provide a catalyst for future research in this area to support YCs.

“[support groups are] somewhere where you can go and be with people who understand you more than your friends”



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