

Coming to Know Women Concealing Pregnancy

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Abstract

This Doctoral Thesis research draws together and develops on insights generated in research with pregnant Irish women I have been involved with since 1995. These entailed three commissioned research projects of women's 'crisis pregnancy' experiences during the ten years between 1996 and 2006 incorporating qualitative interviews with up to 200 women. The latter study focused on concealed pregnancy. In the accounts of women concealing pregnancy I noticed both dissonance and consonance between their accounts and dominant discourses relating to the unique Irish construct of 'crisis pregnancy'. This impelled me to re-engage reflexively with this body of work to ask how can women in pregnancy be known and what more can we know of women in pregnancy?

I argue that the construct of 'crisis pregnancy' has generated a set of normatively disciplined expectations that both shape women's positionality with regard to their reproductive capacity and simultaneously have come to be imposed on women's bodies and become embodied. I consider that the accounts of women 'concealing' pregnancy demonstrate subjection to those norms and discourses but crucially I also identify generative agency in women's concealing pregnancy narratives. This raised the question of how 'subjectivity' can be known that led me to reframe my interview data as Narrative and to follow the emerging interpretative Voice Centred Relational Method as developed by Andrea Doucet and Natasha Mauthner within a case-study framework. The interpretation follows the theoretical work of Pierre Bourdieu as developed by feminist philosopher Lois McNay.

This iteration of analysis strives to (reflexively) come to know the multi-layered subject in terms of perceptions of self, self-in-relation to others and self as structurally located in power relations and dominant ideologies. This allows women concealing pregnancy to be viewed anew so that 'generative agency' on the part of the women can be known.

Chapter 2 -

Pregnancy and Motherhood in the Irish Cultural Context

From the time of the Potato Famine until the early 1970s, the 'fallen women' of Ireland, unmarried mothers, who had broken the sixth or ninth commandments, scrubbed society's dirty clothes. Betrayed by lovers, signed in by families or guardians, they lived in a Spartan and loveless existence. Those who became institutionalised remained in-mates for life and were buried in nameless graves.

(Patricia Burke Brogan, 2004: 161)

The projections of the pregnant mother as post-virginal innocent or a threatening figure to her foetus [have begun] to recede. This opens the door for the first time for a more reflective and comprehensive view of motherhood and an end to her political confinement.

(Roisin Conroy, 2004: 138)

Introduction – Contours of Irish Women's Pregnancy

The cultural narrative of pregnancy and fertility in Ireland has been central to the project of the construction of an identity of Irishness through woman/mother. A central theme in this narrative has been how the Irish displayed a uniquely high fertility rate in a modernising Europe of the twentieth century to constitute the nation as a demographic outlier. When Ireland did begin to record lower fertility rates in the 1970s towards convergence with its 'modernising' neighbours, the rate of decline was rapid such that we moved from the categorisation of high fertility rates to low fertility rates in the thirty year period between 1965 and 1995.

Within this overall narrative of Ireland's fertility is the story of Irish women's pregnancy experiences. Close to home, the contrast in the stories of my mother's and my own childbearing is illustrative in itself of the striking transition in women's domestic, reproductive and social lives within one generation. My mother, Mary Conlon (nee Gethings) gave birth to my oldest brother in 1968 while my youngest sister, in our family of seven children, was born in 1988. By the time my mother completed her childbearing, at age 47 comprising ten pregnancies: seven live births, one still born child and two miscarriages, her completed family size had moved into the category of 'demographic outlier'. My mother began and conducted her sexual

and reproductive biography in an era of legal prohibition as well as cultural antipathy to contraception, divorce, abortion, women's right to work outside the home and women's sexual autonomy within marriage due to the non-recognition of marital rape. The legitimate benchmark for the beginning of my mother's sexual life was marriage at age twenty-six in 1967. Her own mother, Catherine Gethings (nee Coleman), my grandmother who gave me my name but who I never knew, died in her late fifties and my mother continues to mourn and grieve her loss deeply. And what I know most about my maternal grandmother was of her reproductive biography. My Grandmother Gethings was a mother to sixteen children, one child died in infancy and, when taken together with pregnancies she had miscarried, Catherine Gethings had twenty-two pregnancies during her life.

By the time I married at about the same age as my mother thirty years later – my official entry into the sexual and reproductive realm - contraception was legalised by degrees since 1979 and fertility rates had rapidly diminished. The bar to women working in public service after marriage had been lifted, rape within marriage was given legal recognition in 1990, a campaign to introduce divorce was well underway and abortion rights activists, myself included, were succeeding in making Irish women's abortion rates visible, though it remained prohibited within the Constitution. I continued to work and my first child was born seven years after marriage joined then by two other children within a household where equality is jointly striven for by us as a heterosexual couple. My mother is presented with a daughter whose lifestyle is entirely at odds with her own due to choices available to me to regulate my reproductive body by means that were denied to her not technologically but culturally. Reproductive autonomy was simply not within my mother's *habitus*. Rather her sexual subjectivity was marked by an utter absence of autonomy while I have had access to legal, social and economic resources, as well as counter-cultural ideologies, through which I could assert a more autonomous sexual subjectivity.

Crucial to this story is that I grew up in a cultural context where women's subjectivity came to be contested as feminist and woman centred ideologies were re-asserted by the second wave women's movement that brought women's activism back to the fore

during the 1960s-70s. These women, their ideas and actions, created both discursive and material spaces for all women to lay claim to their right to bodily autonomy and integrity (Connolly and O'Toole, 2003; Conroy, 1992 and; Speed, 1992). Yet I also grew up in a context where unmarried women's pregnancies were sources of stigma and pathways to 'shot-gun' marriages or the poverty trap of lone motherhood¹; where the bodies of dead babies, or in the case of 16 year old Anne Lovett, dead babies and their dead mothers, were stumbled across in the Irish countryside, beaches or church grounds and; where abortion was made unconstitutional by an article ratified by referendum in 1983 and later invoked in 1992 to prevent a 14 year old girl, pregnant as a result of rape, from being brought by her parents to England to seek an abortion to save her from suicide. Thus just as the narrative of Irish women's lives since the foundation of our young State is one of both continuity and change (O'Connor, 2008 and 1998; Gray and Ryan, 1997) so too is the contours of Irish women's fertility.

This chapter sets out to trace those contours of the changing narrative of women's pregnancies and pregnant bodies that entails discussion of both discursive and symbolic order as well as the materiality of women's lives. This is because as Fletcher argues

asking or answering why discourses on gender and nation intersect the way they do at particular historical moments ... need[s] a materialist framework ... [that] understands the biological as that which is changed over time by the rational and irrational activity of human beings, and not as something that is unchanging or pre-given(2005: 371)

Discourses on pregnancy and mother/womanhood in Irish identity will be discussed and in particular the discursive construction of woman/mother found in the Irish Constitution. Having considered how women's pregnancies are discursively constructed, I want to then discuss briefly the trends and patterns in women's fertility

¹ EU Survey on Income and Living Conditions, 2006 (CSO, 2007) showed the overall at risk of poverty rate was 17.0% in 2006 but the rate was more than double that for members of lone parent households (39.6%) designating these households as at high risk of poverty. Furthermore these households had the highest levels of consistent poverty (32.5%). Ninety percent of Lone Parent Households are headed by women.

including a focus on women's management of pregnancy and maternity in 'non-normative' contexts. I will particularly consider what is known about women concealing pregnancy and concealment of pregnancy as a phenomenon in the Irish context given the overall focus of this thesis. This then leads back to a discussion of the most significant shift in discourse surrounding pregnancy in the Irish cultural context in recent years, specifically the emergence of the uniquely Irish policy construct of 'crisis pregnancy'. Throughout this account, attention will be given to how the actions, practices, ideas and ideologies of women and women centred events generated dissonances that ultimately generated changed conditions for women's lives. These I consider to reside in the spaces between those dissonant concepts of continuity and change.

Discourses on Pregnancy and Mother/Womanhood in Irish Identity

Since the foundation of the modern Irish State in 1922, women's reproductive bodies have featured centrally in attempts by the post-colonial entity to carve out a particular Irish identity which has shaped women's pregnancy experiences. Analyses of representations of womanhood in Irish identity illustrate how the nation has traditionally been symbolised by Irish motherhood with reproductive maturity defining female subjectivity within Irish discourse (McGovern, 2008; Smyth, 2005; Coogan, 2003; Inglis, 2003; O'Connor, 1998; Gray and Ryan, 1997; Valiulis, 1995; Meaney, 1993; Coulter, 1993). At the foundation of the state in the 1920s, the family was placed at the centre of Irish culture, the nation came to be increasingly symbolised by Irish motherhood and women's (sexual) behaviour became linked with the dignity and integrity of the nation.

Catholicism and patriarchy were two critical ideologies within Irish nation building that generated such symbolism. Smyth outlines how in the project of nation building, colonial and colonised national identities are often constructed relationally with Irishness constructed as not-English wherein Catholicism came to be centrally placed as that which sets the Irish apart (2005: 35). This confessional construction of nationhood was instrumental in the official incorporation of the social principles of Catholicism, alongside those of nationalist republicanism, into the political structures of the State. The process of establishing a new State generated vacuums created by

the absence of an indigenous public sphere and associated social institutions into which the Catholic Church stepped to take control of key institutions of education, health and social welfare (Smyth, 2005; Coogan, 2003; Speed, 1992; Whyte, 1971). Coogan depicts the process thus “As Mother England vacated the corridors of power, Mother Church took them over.” (2003: 170). The Catholic social principle of the patriarchal family as the primary unit of society became a central tenet of the social policies of the Irish state with women’s reproductive bodies coming in for specific focus of attention. Inglis depicts how the Catholic church dominated the field of Irish sexuality well into the second half of the twentieth century promoting a traditionalist discourse portraying sex as sin and sickness (1998: 38). As the Church were, and indeed continue to be, key in managing the Irish education system with almost total control of primary schools its capacity to exert influence in the management of sexuality in Ireland has been and is still considerable (Inglis, 1998).

Highly proscribed sexual morality became particularly located in the control of women’s bodies. Breda Gray and Louise Ryan’s (1997) analysis of the discursive construction of Ireland as female, demonstrate how representations of womanhood in Irish identity at the foundation of the state acted as a medium through which the vulnerability and need for protection of the foundling state could be given expression. This in turn gave rise to women’s sexual behaviour being linked with the dignity and integrity of the nation. Following a very traditionalist form of nation building, the family was placed at the centre of Irish culture and the nation came to be increasingly symbolised by Irish motherhood. The images of woman and mothers emanating from such symbolism incorporated messages about appropriate lifestyles of women and young girls and in particular the appropriate context for motherhood culminating in strict dictates prescribing women’s sexual behaviour. (Gray and Ryan, 1997) McGovern (2009) argues that these narratives of nationalist personification often regard women as objects, deny them agency and refuse their lived experiences. While Gray and Ryan (1997) acknowledge the massive socio-economic changes that have occurred in Ireland since the 1920s, they demonstrate continuities in the use of such symbols and representations of women in the Irish context. In particular, the designation of the traditional nuclear marriage based family with the mother at its centre as the core unit of Irish society has endured. Highly

proscribed sexual morality located particularly in the control of women's bodies has meant that pregnancy has in turn been so proscribed.

Women in the Irish Constitution

While the 1916 Proclamation and the 1922 Constitution that founded the State contained laudable statements on equality with reference to gender, once instituted the State rowed back on this position (Coulter, 1993; Coogan, 2003). Coulter describes how the newly established State introduced:

Discriminatory legislation relating to illegitimacy and divorce, the barring of women from jury service, [] measures to restrict women's access to employment and equal treatment at work [], and laws relating to issues like contraception which bore especially heavily on women.

(Coulter, 1993: 25)

In 1937, fifteen years after the founding of the State, the Fianna Fail government headed by Eamon de Valera undertook to ratify a new and more conservative Constitution. Coulter describes the government party as "a thoroughly patriarchal organisation" and de Valera as "personally hostile to women's equality" features reflected in the Constitution (Coulter, 1993:25). However, Conroy (2004) reminds us that the 1937 constitution was the culmination of a discriminatory process against women rather than the onset of it because between 1929 and 1936:

a series of planned legislative enactments had the effect of systematically stripping women and girls of the right to hold jobs in emerging occupations, prevent or space their pregnancies, protect themselves from venereal diseases or read informative books about their bodies.

(Conroy, 2004: 130)

This is most strongly articulated in the formulation of Article 41 of the new Constitution which designates recognition of women to the support women give to the state 'by her life within the home' and contains the aspiration to ensure she would not have to neglect her 'duties' there. The 1937 Constitution, through this article both imagined and institutionalised the role of mother within the Irish Republic within an archetypal patriarchal discourse. Woman and mother are used interchangeably, women are located within the home as a duty and positioned as 'givers' to the State of a essential support towards the common good with motherhood anticipated solely within a marital unit. Kennedy (2004) characterises women's experiences of motherhood within this cultural context as one marked by

struggles, where women are confined and constrained by their reproductive role by a patriarchal State and Church who sets out to define woman as mother at the same time as shaping policies that leave women unsupported in mothering. Smyth characterises Irish national identity construction as

through an essentialist construction of landscape and 'nature', frequently signified through discourses of gender and sexuality, combined with romantic traditionalism.
(2005: 37)

She further described hegemonic Irishness throughout the twentieth century as characterised by themes of Catholicism; traditionalism; familism and masculinist heterosexuality.

Women Invoke the Irish Constitution

When the women's movement in Ireland refreshed itself² in the 1960s and 1970s in tandem with the re-emergence of women's movements in other western democratic states alongside analogous liberation and civil rights movements on the island and abroad, women did succeed in using articles of the Constitution to advance their rights in conjunction with other state and supra-state mechanisms. This supports O'Connor's argument that though an essentially conservative document, the Constitution of 1937 included both conservative and libertarian principles (O'Connor, 1998). Legal challenges launched by individual women, supported by the women's groups such as the Irish Women's Liberation Movement (IWLM), invoked articles of the Constitution to challenge discriminatory legislation. In 1974 the Supreme Court ruled in favour of Mary McGee who challenged the constitutionality of a 1935 law banning the importation of contraceptives on the grounds that it breached the constitutional right to marital privacy³. IWLM members Máirín de Burca and Mary Anderson successfully challenged the 1927 Juries Act which had precluded women's participation in jury service.

² I use this term rather than the term 'emerged' or 're-emerged' in awareness of what Linda Connolly (2002) demonstrated in her analysis of the Irish women's movement, namely that there had always been women moving and agitating for women's rights in the Republic of Ireland, a legacy of the involvement of women in the nationalist movement that strove for independence from Britain. Connolly (2002) identifies women activists such as Hilda Tweedy who were a link between women's activists of the 1940s and 50s and the IWLM of subsequent decades. See also Ferriter on this issue, (2010: 400-406).

³ Mary Robinson, the future first woman Irish President (1990-1997) represented Mary McGee as Barrister.

This period of political activism by women in Ireland also featured the invocation of a UN directive to have National Commissions on the Status of Women set up. The first Irish Commission on the Status of Women reported in 1972 having received submissions from 41 groups. Its recommendations principally related to areas of equal pay, promotion and equal opportunity including maternity leave but also covered matters such as social welfare, law, taxation, education and family planning (Connolly and O'Toole, 2003; Ferriter, 2010). A broad based National Council on the Status of Women was established to monitor the implementation of the report's recommendations. The Council has since evolved to become the National Women's Council of Ireland with mass based support (Connolly, 1997). Alongside these Constitutional challenges, women centred services and support organisations were established during the 1970s including Family Planning Services, Well Woman Centres, support groups for lone mothers, particularly Cherish, and a service for Irish women seeking support and information on accessing abortion outside the state, the Irish Pregnancy Counselling Service.

Irish Constitution (Re-)Invoked Against Women

The insertion of an anti-abortion amendment into the Constitution in 1983 represented a renewed role for the Constitution in symbolising woman and motherhood in Irish identity⁴. The impetus for the campaign to insert a constitutional position on abortion has been attributed to a response to actions on the part of feminist organisations to campaign for abortion legalisation in Ireland (Hesketh, 1990; Smyth, 1992; and Mahon, 2001). Connolly and O'Toole (2005) in contrast see the event as a response to changes in the status of women that occurred more generally throughout the 1970s rather than to a specific movement in support of women's right to abortion services in Ireland. While Fletcher (2005) argues that the event was a reaction to the changes in fertility trends brought about by women's contraceptive use and practices saying that "the abortion ban has played an important cultural role in managing anxieties about changes in reproductive practices." (2005: 380). Thus while there is debate about the whether the campaign

⁴ For further reading on the insertion of 40.3.3 into the Irish Constitution and its effects see for example Hesketh, 1990; Smyth, 1992; Schweppe, 2008; Smyth, 2005; Kingston et al, 1997; Solomons. 1992; Smyth, 1992; O'Reilly, 1992; Jackson, 1987; Randall, 1987.

to insert an anti-abortion amendment into the Irish Constitution arose in response to a specific feminist movement in support of women's rights relating to abortion access, to wider feminist activism in support of women's reproductive rights more generally, or to individual women's changed fertility, pregnancy and childbearing practices there is consensus that women's agency in relation to their reproductive bodies at either organised or individual level, or indeed as a dynamic between the two, was a key catalyst in this reactionary initiative.

In the public debate generated by the amendment campaign, the emphasis on women's reproductive rights became marginal even among those opposing the amendment. Mahon (2001) argues that pragmatism reigned wherein a significant section of feminist organisations forged allegiance with a broadly liberal Anti-Amendment campaign on the grounds that a position supporting liberalisation of abortion would lose them support. For Mahon the debate generated by this event "established abortion within a frame of traditional Irish Catholic values versus secular inroads from abroad" (2001: 161) wherein the women's movement principally rejected a gendering of the discourse in favour of a neutral appeal to liberalisation therein pursuing a strategy of cooptation. Feminist voices and positions were expressed alongside this pragmatic stance but were not given space in public discourse principally controlled by a conservative media (Smyth, 2005). Ferriter (2009) highlights however how female, and I would add feminist, journalists, particularly powerful writers such as Nell McCafferty, Mary Holland and Nuala O'Faolain, did succeed in influencing how society looked at issues of relevance to women and the manner in which the law and legal systems affected them (2009: 467). Feminist critiques also continued to be a feature such as Barry's view that the amendment had the effect of positioning women's legal and constitutional status in this State as lesser citizens (Barry, 1992). Just as Mahon depicts the framing of abortion as a symbolic signifier, feminist cultural theorist Ger Meaney in turn saw this event as continuing in the vein of traditional symbolic images of Irish motherhood that have served to obliterate the reality of women's lives and perpetuate an image of 'woman' far from the experience, expectations and ideals of Irish women and women living in Ireland (Meaney, 1993). To which I would agree and go further to say it bolstered such symbolism and brought with it a greater sense of criminality