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Single Pregnant Women's Encounters in Public: Changing Norms or Performing Roles?

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Abstract

This paper presents data on single pregnant women's encounters in public in an Irish context. Data were collected using in-depth interviews, which were analysed using a grounded theory strategy. The study was conducted in Dublin City and 51 unmarried women whose ages ranged from 16-36 participated. Findings suggested that while dominant public discourses on non-marital childbearing within the culture were negative (albeit challenged) at the time data were being collected, responses from others whom participants interacted with in verbal face-to-face encounters in public were generally (though certainly not exclusively) experienced as positive in tone. An attempt is made to explain the discrepancy between the mainly negative macro messages and mainly positive micro messages by drawing on Erving Goffman's theory of dramaturgy; it would seem that at the micro-level of interaction, a 'performance' was being acted out that may be at variance with definitions of non-marital pregnancy expressed by those beyond the encounter.

Introduction

Despite a large increase in non-marital births since the 1970s (Central Statistics Office, 1971-1995), dominant discourses on the social organisation of reproduction in the Republic of Ireland continue to problematise non-marital motherhood to varying degrees. Against this background, this paper presents an analysis of single pregnant women's encounters in public, and explores the extent to which ideologies about childbearing mediated participants' experiences of interactions in public. It is argued that the responses of others whom participants encountered impacted on the latter's own construction of the pregnancy as problematic or otherwise. It will be indicated that a strong feature of data was the generally positive responses conveyed by other social actors in verbal face-to-face engagements. However, given that the dominant public discourses on non-marital childbearing within the culture were negative (albeit challenged) at the time data were being collected, and that most participants had experienced negative reactions to the pregnancy from parents (Hyde, 1997b), it would seem that at the micro-level of interaction, a 'performance' was being staged that may belie versions of the pregnancy asserted beyond the encounter.

The paper will begin with an overview of discourses on childbearing in Ireland in the years preceding data collection in order to locate data in their social context, and lend support to the overall argument being advanced. An outline of the methodological stance adopted will follow. Data will then be presented and analysed on a selection of encounters sharing common feature where women experienced others' views on, or impressions of, the pregnancy. The work of Erving Goffman will be drawn on throughout the analysis. The current paper confines

itself to specific types of encounters that participants reported. The women's wider experiences of the pregnancy and additional varieties of interaction they experienced, beyond those presented here, are reported on elsewhere (Hyde, 1996, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1998, 1999, 2000 (in press)).

Discourses on Non-Marital Childbearing

In the earlier part of this century, and for some time prior to it, the rate of non-marital births in Ireland was low by European standards (Connolly, 1979). Given Ireland's strong Catholic ideology and concern with sexual morality, non-marital childbearing was met with strong disapproval, and institutional segregation of non-marital mothers was commonplace (O'Hare et al, 1987). By the 1990s, the climate had changed, and almost all non-marital children were being kept by their mothers (An Bord Uchtala, 1994); there was also evidence of a growing acceptance of sex-before-marriage (Whelan and Fahey, 1994). Moreover, by 1993 Ireland's once highly restrictive legislation on condom availability was among the most liberal in Europe (Jacobsen, 1994).

The shift in thinking was initially evident in the 1970s when a growing sympathy for non-marital mothers was witnessed (Kilkenny Social Services, 1972); however, a further change in attitudes became apparent in the 1980s and 1990s, when a contradictory set of discourses emerged on non-marital motherhood. On the one hand, the status of illegitimacy was removed in the *Status of Children's Act (1987)* and property and maintenance rights of non-marital children were aligned with those of marital children. Additionally, the Unmarried Mother's

Allowance was absorbed into the Lone Parents' Allowance in 1990 which could be interpreted as reducing the stigma of non-marital childbearing by treating women and men parenting alone in a similar way irrespective of their marital status. However, although the label of 'illegitimacy' has been removed, from the mid 1980s, an increasing hostility towards non-marital mothers began to be noted (*Irish Times*, 10/09/87, 26/07/88; *Evening Herald*, 18/12/87); the upsurge of negative attitudes was based in economic concerns about the drain on resources of the welfare state, rather than religious concerns about sexual morality which dominated in the previous era (Federation of Services for Unmarried Parents and their Children, 1986, 1987; *Irish Independent*, 23/05/87, 10/09/87).

There were of course more liberal discourses challenging the dominant ideology around marriage and childbearing; these tended to manifest themselves in an acceptance of dual-parent, non-adolescent, and non-welfare dependent units (*Irish Times*, 19/09/93, 07/03/94; *Irish Independent*, 09/09/93). Nonetheless, the two-parent marital family was still widely prescribed as an accepted rule of conduct in organising reproduction at the time when data for present study were being collected, with figures for the increase in non-marital births generally being met with alarm (*Evening Press*, 09/09/89, 04/10/93; *Irish Press*, 25/01/92; *The Star*, 23/09/92). This generated questions about whether discourses on childbearing at the macro-level mediated single women's experiences in negotiating encounters in public at the micro level, and if so, in what way.

Methodological Position

Fifty-one study participants were selected from the Out-Patient Department of a large maternity hospital in Dublin while they were pregnant. Inclusion criteria were that informants would be first-time mothers-to-be, and would not be married to the expected baby's father. Participants ages ranged from sixteen to thirty-six years with twelve of the women under twenty years when they gave birth. Informed consent was obtained and anonymity maintained through using pseudonyms.

In-depth interviews were undertaken on two separate occasions for each woman; firstly, in the third trimester of pregnancy, and secondly, between weeks six and eight after the birth, with a few exceptions. Data collection began in mid 1992 and was completed in late 1993. As this paper is concerned with the time when participants were pregnant, all interview data presented here were gleaned during the first interviews.

A grounded theory style of analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1987; Glaser, 1992) was employed to qualitatively code data, although this strategy was utilised selectively. The central techniques of the constant comparative method, openness to evolving theoretical insights, and sampling for theoretical relevance were all utilised.

Others' Positive Responses to the Pregnancy

Positive responses to the pregnancy from those whom participants encountered tended to take two forms: firstly, where the commentator's remarks revealed a consciousness that this

was a non-marital pregnancy and might be framed as aberrant by others, or might have been defined as such in a different era; and secondly, where no reference was made to the non-marital status of the pregnancy. Examples of the first type of response are as follows:

Frances: But I find people are inclined to sort of make [pause], you know if we were out at night now, down at the local or anything . . . The neighbours sort of know now within the last six weeks. They're inclined to sort of make excuses and say, like you know, 'Don't be worrying. It'll be all right. Everything's different this day and age.'

AH: Would these be people your own age?

Frances: No no, older men and women.

AH: What kinds of things would they say when they approach you?

Frances: 'Congratulations. I heard the good news.'

AH: Would they ask how you felt first before they said that?

Frances: No, no. And they'd say, 'Don't worry. Your parents will come around, you know' [laughs]. That sort of way, before you get a chance to say, 'Hello,' 'Goodbye,' or anything . . . everybody lives in your pockets in this neighbourhood and the only reason

they said it was because they had known the sort of reaction at home.

(26 year old nurses' aide, first interview)

AH: What would their [mother's friends] response be?

Una: 'Ah God, that's great. Don't be worrying,' and all that. 'All these old wives tales. It's only a nine-day wonder. It's nothing now to get pregnant,' and all this kind of thing. They were, 'Sure it's nothing nowadays,' 'cause I'm a single mother.

(19 year old waitress, first interview)

The tension between the definition of non-marital pregnancies as deviant and the more recent way of formulating non-marital pregnancies as acceptable is evident in Frances' and Una's accounts above. Congratulations are offered, but are contextualised against a background where the problematisation of non-marital childbearing is being acknowledged. The commentators who express positive responses here are aware that they are presenting a favourable definition against a background of established meanings where non-marital childbearing has been stigmatised.

In the second type of response, congratulations were forthcoming where no reference was made at all to the non-marital circumstances of the pregnancy. While participants did not necessarily expect condemnation, it was, nonetheless, often

highly unexpected that others would respond so positively to news of the pregnancy:

Una: There was an elderly woman I was talking to the other day. I was coming up the road, and she knows my mum and dad well, you know. She lived with her sister. They're old maids, if that's the right word for them, and she said, 'We'll have to start knitting for you now.' She's in her sixties I'd say. There's another woman down in the village. I didn't know what way she was going to take it. She was the same age as my mother, maybe a bit younger, you know, and she's a real little old biddy, you know, and I told her, and she said, 'That's brilliant!' You'd want to hear her. I couldn't believe it. And she kept saying, 'Make sure you keep yourself warm, and keep taking your iron tablets. And after the baby's born, take your iron tablets.' She was gas. Everyone's taking it surprisingly well. (19 year old waitress, first interview)

Pauline: They're all saying, 'Oh we can't wait.' Even when I told them, they said, 'Congratulations.' It wasn't 'Oh my God, you're not pregnant! How could you be so stupid?'

(20 year old secretary, first interview)

Virtually all participants who experienced positive responses to the pregnancy suggested that such public perceptions enhanced the way they felt about the pregnancy. Favourable interactions such as these played a considerable part in re-framing a pregnancy that had been constructed disapprovingly either by themselves or their parents:

AH: What kinds of things did people at work say?

Celine: It was a bit of a surprise. They were all, 'Congratulations, I heard the news.' You know, none of them actually said, 'Oh my God!' It sort of felt good actually that after all the problems having to tell mum and dad and that, and at the end of it then for people to be actually accepting it

(17 year old school pupil, first interview)

Antoinette: Everyone I've told has been very nice and supportive. They'd say 'Congratulations,' or whatever. It cheers you u. (19 year old, unemployed, first interview).

Goffman's work on dramaturgy would seem to provide some explanatory power through which to understand participants' face-to-face encounters. Goffman (1969:14) defines face-to-face interaction as 'the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another's actions when in one another's immediate physical presence'. Goffman constructs the activity of a particular participant on a given occasion as a *performance*; others involved in the situation are seen as either observers or co-participants. What Goffman refers to as a *part* or *routine* is the 'pre-established pattern of action which is unfolded during a performance and which may be presented or played through on other occasions . . .' (Goffman, 1969:14). The performance has two parts, the *front* and the *backstage*. The front is the part of the individual's performance that functions to define the situation for the observers. Furthermore, when the individual presents himself or herself, the performance will tend to project

society's accredited values, more than does the person's behaviour as a whole (Goffman, 1969). The backstage is the location where 'the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course' (Goffman, 1969:97). In the backstage, the front can be dropped, and it is here that 'illusions and impressions are openly constructed' (Goffman, 1969:97).

Given that dominant discourses around non-marital childbearing tend to be negative, as did parental responses, the positive responses experienced by participants in the present study may resemble Goffman's (1969) notion of protective practices in social encounters, although it is not being suggested that all positive encounters amounted to performances. According to Goffman (1969:202-204), where tact is being used, 'the audience and outsiders act in a protective way in order to help the performers to save their own show', and '. . . at moments of crisis for the performers, the whole audience may come into tacit collusion with them in order to help them out.' Others' treatment of the pregnancy in a propitious manner supports participants' 'performances' by detracting from any sense of 'mistake' or deviant behaviour.

Participants rarely corrected the positive definitions of others about the pregnancy where these were at variance with their own, but instead simply accepted the others' good wishes, irrespective of how much trauma the pregnancy had caused them, and how inappropriate the congratulations were felt to be:

Jessie: They'd [the neighbours] just say, 'How're you feeling?' 'When are you due?' 'Congratulations.'

AH: How would you respond to that?

Jessie: I'd say 'thanks.' I'd have to be nice. I couldn't turn around and say, 'What do you mean?' (21 year old, unemployed, first interview).

Penny: A few of them [friends] were saying, 'Congratulations,' which, like you know, it's not as if I'd actually planned it, so I didn't feel 'Congratulations' were in order, but, ah, they were all great, you know.

AH: How did you feel when people said, 'Congratulations' to you?

Penny: I thought it was kind of funny really, you know. Because it wasn't planned so it seemed a bit funny.

AH: How did you respond to that?

Penny: I'd just kind of sit there and say nothing
(24 year old receptionist, first interview).

Goffman's ideas on support by the audience of the performer, is taken further in considering the possibility that 'performers will learn that they are being tactfully protected' (Goffman, 1969:205). According to Goffman (1969), the employment of tact on the performer's behalf by the audience necessitates the performer to act in such a way as to make possible the provision of this help. The acceptance by study participants of others' expressed positive definitions of the situation without contradiction, as in the above examples, is doing just that.

There may, of course, be vast differences in the definition of non-marital childbearing as positive in face-to-face encounters with pregnant women (front stage) compared to constructions of such pregnancies more generally. Nonetheless, face-to-face positive interpretations of the pregnancy, however much they might have been staged, did have a fairly strong impact on how the woman herself defined or began to redefine the pregnancy. This may in part account for a sense of adjustment to the pregnancy which the vast majority of women experienced towards the end of the gestation period.

While many women expressed the view that they accepted others' comments as *bona fide*, a small number of others were somewhat sceptical about the genuineness of positive commentary. In these cases, participants suspected that a performance was being enacted that did not correspond readily with the backstage version.

Kathy: It's just, the generation's different. There is more young girls getting pregnant. An awful lot towards ages ago. And I just think if you were talking to one of them [older mothers], they'd be disgusted, you know.

AH: You think so?

Kathy: They'd pretend that they were [pause], you know, acting nice but under it all [pause].

AH: Do you mean that they would be nice to your face, but disapprove behind your back?

Kathy: Yeah, saying, 'Unmarried,' and you know, 'Having a baby at her age, she should be ashamed!' you know all that. I know the way women go on. I know the way they do go on.

(19 year old, unemployed, first interview)

Una: I know if people are thinking bad they're not going to really say it to you, you know that kind of way. Not a lot of people would turn around and say to you, 'That's terrible!' you know that kind of way.

(19 year old waitress, first interview)

A few participants did encounter negative responses to the pregnancy in face-to-face encounters both from extended family members and others, although this was much less common than the receipt of supportive or positive comments. Negative responses came from younger people as well as older people, although participants dreaded the responses of older people more.

Perceived Negative Responses

While Goffman's notion of dramaturgy is useful in analysing encounters where participants received positive commentary on the pregnancy, it has greater difficulty in being sustained in those instances where participants were less than happy with others' responses. Goffman's notion of 'performance' has been the subject of criticism, in so far as it suggested that individuals

were constantly acting in public encounters, and did not allow for negative cases (for an overview of critiques of Goffman's idea of 'performance' see Manning (1992: 51-55)). The earlier construction of 'performance' as occurring in all social encounters was modified by Goffman himself in his later work where the notion of 'performance' was acknowledged as being limited in its applicability (Manning, 1992). In spite of the criticisms of the concept of 'performance', it was still considered to be useful, especially in situations where the characters in the encounters were seen to be discredited, and under pressure to perform a role (Manning, 1992). This suggests that while 'performance' is a useful concept to the present analysis, particularly since participants have indicated the delicate nature of information and tension management in many of the encounters described, as with virtually all theoretical positions, its application is limited when considering cases where participants reported what they perceived to be negative responses.

Comments during interactions which tended to be interpreted negatively by participants were of three kinds: firstly, offers of sympathy; secondly, allusions to the intellectual incapacity of the woman in controlling her fertility; and thirdly, references to the putative father where he was absent. Sympathy was perceived as an indication that the other party did not see the pregnancy as acceptable, with offers of condolence deemed necessary:

Rita: You're trying to come to terms with it yourself and when someone turns around and gives you sympathy it sort of knocks you back. It makes it into a problem as if you had a serious illness or something like that.

(19 year old secretary, first interview)

Trish: I was kind of saying, 'Will you be happy for me?' If I had been married to some bastard who was beating me up, it would have been fine. Everyone would have been saying, 'Congratulations.' And I'm sick of people feeling sorry for me, 'cause I'm looking forward to having the baby.

(22 year old receptionist, first interview)

As occurred with participants' parents (Hyde, 1997b), many of the negative comments related to a perceived lack of intellect associated with becoming pregnant non-maritally, rather than a concern with sexual morality:

Nora: There was a girl I had been friendly with. She didn't like the fact that I was going out with somebody. I met her one day, and she said, 'How are you?' and I said, 'Very pregnant!' and normally the reaction would be, 'Are you happy?' and she didn't like it at all, the fact that I was pregnant, and she said, 'You're joking.' I don't believe you. God, you're such a fool!

(22 year old secretary, first interview)

Where women were no longer in a relationship with the putative father, they expressed relief that questions concerning the relationship were avoided in social conversations as this detracted attention from the extent to which they deviated from gender prescriptions for childbearing. A few participants, however, were actually questioned about the relationship with the putative father in face-to face encounters, usually by young women. In cases where the relationship had not been sustained, revealing the partner's absence tended to make participants feel uncomfortable. In at least one case, unfavourable remarks were made and the participant experienced these as highly negative and uncomfortable, inducing a defensive response:

Norma: Sometimes now I would go out and some people would say little things. Like one time someone said, 'Go 'way. You haven't even got a fellow so I don't know how you can walk around . . .' You know, say things.

AH: Who would these be?

Norma: A girl down the road. She goes, 'At least I have the fellow,' you know when you're like that, and it drove me mad. And I just went, 'You cheeky old bitch,' and I walked off. I wouldn't let her know it bothered me but it really got to me, it did, and then I walked off. It's only one, now, that would say it like that and she's an old bitch as well.

(21 year old, unemployed, first interview)

A small number of participants protected themselves against possible negative responses by deliberately avoiding people

whom they strongly suspected would voice negative views about their situation, and selectively interacting only with those who provided support:

Iris: 'Cause, like, I didn't like going up there [former locality] any more. Because I know [pause], it's small. Well it's not small but it's very clannish and they all knew who I was, like I still haven't been up. If I go up, I go up during the day when I know everybody's working.

AH: Why's that?

Iris: To avoid people looking and people asking questions.

AH: When they talk to you, for example, what do they say?

Iris: I don't know. I haven't seen anybody. I've totally avoided them. I'll be fine, like I know, once it's over, like . . . just people I don't like looking for information. It's gossip in town.

AH: Ah ha. So you've managed to avoid that.

Iris: Well I've still kept in touch with my friends and I've gone up like but I've avoided the places where the gossip is . . . [laughs].

(21 year old office clerk, first interview)

Goffman (1963) has noted how the anticipation of face-to-face encounters between normal and stigmatised people can result in both parties arranging events so as to avoid such encounters. Participants were often made aware of the 'backstage' versions of the pregnancy (which were often negative) being voiced by extended family and acquaintances through closer family members and friends. While participants sometimes noticed a difference in the behaviour of disapproving extended family members towards them once the pregnancy was revealed, indications of disapproval were expressed far more commonly to others than to participants themselves.

Summary and Conclusion

The preceding data suggest that, during the gestation period, participants' definitions of the pregnancies were highly sensitive to the type of responses they experienced in social encounters. Positive responses to the pregnancy by others whom participants encountered in public, tended to influence participants' own interpretations of the pregnancy by shifting such constructions to a more positive position in situations where they were previously more negative. Encounters where the pregnancy was disparaged by others had the opposite influence in that they tended to problematise the pregnancy for participants, or reinforce participants' already problematised version of the pregnancy. It has been indicated in data that interactions in which negative views were expressed verbally were more the exception than the rule. Participants generally expressed surprise at how well other people responded to the pregnancy. Given the widespread negative views being expressed in the media about non-marital childbearing, and participants'

exposure to others' candid perceptions on the issues prior to their pregnancies, it is perhaps not surprising that informants generally anticipated more negative responses than they actually received. Furthermore, as indicated earlier, most participants' parents were overtly less than happy with news of the pregnancy. However, since most verbalised responses experienced by participants (beyond those of immediate family members) were more positive than negative, with the pregnancies being treated as normal and auspicious, it may suggest that the views of social actors in public encounters either were irreconcilable with media coverage of non-marital childbearing, or at least did not identify with the media's predominantly negative views.

Alternatively, it may have been the case that social actors were involved in a front stage 'performance' which masked the backstage one. Indeed, information that women had acquired regarding others' responses (especially those of extended family) suggests that beyond face-to-face engagements, responses may not have been as positive as those acted out in verbal public encounters. Indeed data on the responses of participants' parents reported on elsewhere (Hyde, 1997b) support the notion of a different (more negative) definition of events in the 'backstage'. Furthermore, as indicated in data presented in this paper, a small number of women deliberately avoided face-to-face encounters with those who might present negative versions of the pregnancy, that is, those who might not modify their backstage definition of events for the performance. Perhaps the most salient point is that, regardless of whether perceptions of the pregnancy were staged or not, positive encounters impacted on the woman's own perceptions of the pregnancy by reducing her sense of deviance where this was

experienced, or in sustaining her positive perceptions of the pregnancy, as the case may be. In this sense, positively experienced face-to-face encounters tended to undermine the impact of the dominant (negative) public discourses about non-marital mothers, and as such were very important to women's overall experiences of the pregnancy. While some positively experienced face-to-face encounters may have been 'staged performances' (to draw on Goffman), and may have manifested differing interpretations of the pregnancy compared to the latent backstage version, they were, nonetheless, important in contributing to women's sense of adjustment to the pregnancy.

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