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Grieving Conceptions

Making Motherhood in the Wake of Infertility in Ireland

In Ireland, reproduction has been part of a complex web of social, religious, and family politics that positions womanhood as synonymous with motherhood and naturalized gender roles. This paper describes how grief offers some women a means of appropriating, redefining and maintaining a motherhood identity, even among those who remain childless. Based on eighteen months of fieldwork collecting interviews with forty women and some of their partners, this paper explores how a long standing ideology of motherhood and the reproductive politics of choice continue to resonate in the changing social context of twenty first century Ireland. I also explore how childless women challenge the societal construction of their “failure” to conceive as a failure to embrace the cultural ideal of motherhood. I show how grief provides a social and emotional opportunity to give a sense of personhood to the children they conceived of without conceiving physically. This paper describes the formal and informal rituals, services and memorials created by many women in Ireland to legitimize grief for lost children in the wake of an inability to conceive and to lay claim to a motherhood identity. I draw on the narratives of the women in my study to illustrate this complex identity politics of motherhood. These women’s stories contest the notion that motherhood begins with a biological or social moment and challenge conception as a material achievement defined and understood through a medical or scientific lens.

In Ireland, reproduction has been part of a complex web of social, religious, and family politics that positions womanhood as synonymous with motherhood and naturalizes gender roles. The experiences of women who do not conceive children because they, or their partners, are infertile are thus counter to dominant pro-family, pronatalist social norms and expectation. This paper describes how grief—a profound sense of sorrow and loss—offers some women a means of

appropriating, redefining, and sustaining a motherhood identity, even among those who remain childless. Drawing on narratives from interviews conducted in the Republic of Ireland I will provide examples of grieving as a strategy that seeks to materialize loss, rendering tangible and legitimate an otherwise invisible motherhood identity. Moreover, grief serves as a means of making sense of infertility experiences as a disruption of life plans while also reaffirming the dominant social values and norms inherent in those life plans.

This paper is based on my Ph.D. research in anthropology during which I spent 18 months in 2004 and 2005 living in Ireland. Using a critical medical anthropology focus I explored the political, medical, moral and social meanings attributed to fertility and infertility. I examined these meanings in a context where motherhood has been co-opted into state discourses as part of national identity-making and the moral authority of the Roman Catholic Church has shaped the reproductive politics of the nation. The project is a qualitative interview-based ethnography in which I use the interviews themselves as part of participant observation since I am as much a part of the story's unfolding as the narrator.¹

The discursive constitution of infertility as both socially and medically abnormal and “deviant” exemplifies what Michel Foucault describes as the “anatomy-politics of the human body” (139-140). Reproduction is at the heart of Foucault's description of “biopower” exercised by defining norms and regulating bodies of both individuals and populations. Heather Paxson describes the “pathologization of infertility” as part of the process in which “the social problem of childlessness is folded into nature” and the desire for motherhood is constituted as natural (220). How can an inability to conceive be seen as anything but “failure” in this context?

Within the larger story about complex and often contested meanings of fertility, infertility, motherhood and family I began to recognize stories of the need to lay claim to motherhood, as an identity, in the absence of children. For some women this need for legitimacy is rooted in the naturalized heteronormative progression between marriage and motherhood in Ireland. Many of my participants described this progression in narratives about a kind of social imperative conveyed in people's assumptions and the constant questioning they faced about having (or not having) children. I will begin with the imperative to be mothers.

“Anything Stirring?” Confirming the Ideology of Motherhood

Central to the analysis in this paper is an understanding of the depth and impact of an ideology of motherhood in Ireland. Judith Butler emphasizes the performative aspects of gender identities—that subjectivities are about

performing and about doing. In this sense *doing* is *being* (3). It is through the performance of an identity that we experience the processes of subjectification and enact them. For women in Ireland this form of subjectification employs the embodied ideals of fertility centered in women's bodies with motherhood as its ultimate representation.

An ideology of motherhood in Ireland is embedded in and sustains both a nationalist identity and a patriarchal norm as the basis for family and state structures. In fact, the Irish Constitution of 1939 has been cited by many feminist scholars as discursive evidence, in and of itself, for the social and political folding of women's identities into the ideals of a motherhood ideology.² This goes hand in hand with what many describe as an ideology of familism in which there seems to be little opportunity for alternatives to hetero-normative identities (Byrne 72). The sense of oneself as 'always already' a mother even in the absence of children can be explained in part by what Louis Althusser has described as "*interpellation* or hailing" wherein people recognize themselves as "always already subjects" (48-50 emphasis original). The relationship between ideology and subjectivity is one in which ideology "recruits subjects" and in the process of *interpellation*, the sensation of being hailed or called, draws upon our awareness that we are already both "concrete individual" and "concrete subject" (Althusser 46-48).³ We are called and at the same time recognize ourselves as subjects. Women, by virtue of recognizing themselves as women, are thus already constituted as mothers and there is little social acceptance of an alternative.

Several women talked about the Irish expression "anything stirring?"—a frequent question to newly married women in the past and one that still makes its way into conversations, particularly with older relatives. This question locates the responsibility for fertility, conception and reproduction in women's bodies and puts a particular onus on them to answer for childlessness in a marital relationship.

Jane: *When you are one or two years married people say to you "how long are you married" and they say "hmm time for a family." Then when you say I'm six years married they go "oh." And they don't ask. Cause it's kind of like, it's that way in Ireland. Two or three years it's like the waiting time. And after that, that's it. So I know that people know and don't say it. In a way maybe that's a good thing and I have never had anybody be really insensitive or brutal. I think that has changed in Ireland. There's a lot less of the "anything stirring?" stuff. You know that used to be a program on years ago and this man used to be constantly saying to his wife "anything stirring?" and it meant are you pregnant. The Irishisms. But I think people have become more aware through all the information and they don't ask and they kind of figure it out and leave it alone you know.*

Jane points out how an assumption that children will follow marriage in quick succession has endured in Ireland as part of a logical or ‘natural’ life trajectory for women. Any deviation from the anticipated trajectory engenders feelings of inadequacy and exposes people to questions by others that suggest they have somehow “failed.”

Lisa: I find it very annoying with people. So, yeah, people used to ask, “and so when will there be the pitter-patter of little feet?”; “now you have the house” and blab, blab, blab, and “you shouldn’t be working so hard that you’re not thinking about having a family”—that kind of thing. I find that kind of thing childish really.

Carol Ann: And then you just take it for granted that you will get pregnant and that’s it.

Vince: And a lot of people take it for granted that ... you know how people say ‘how many children have you got?’ ... Uhm ... none. And there’s this kind of aura like, “oh there’s probably something wrong with you, is there?”

CA: Hmm, do you remember my mother, when we were married just before we started going for treatment? It had been about two years and I had told her nothing at the time, like. And she did say to me, “you know, you want to be thinking, Carol Ann, about having a baby.” ... And she actually said “because you know, people expect it....”

The constant questioning of childless couples in Ireland is located by Flo Delaney, as part of the “freemasonry of the fertile” (73). Delaney links the hetero-normative ideal of marriage and children to pronatalism fuelled by Catholicism but the political symbolism of marriage, motherhood and family extends to the nation’s Constitution as well (Conrad 72-3; Curtin 48; Smyth 7). Even in an era of post-Catholicism,⁴ in which people can at once critique and acknowledge the influence of the Church’s ethos, reproduction remains central in sustaining the meaning of family in Ireland, supporting the current emphasis on fertility as a norm.

“Conceived in the Heart”: Motherhood in the Absence of Children

Catherine’s story introduced me to the idea that conception was not always about biology when she spoke about “conceiving in the heart.” Although I heard similar stories from six of the forty women in my study, Catherine’s story exemplifies best the experience of being childless while embodying what

seemed to be a motherhood identity. She describes the puzzle of grieving for something that is not—something that may never have existed materially but is experienced as real nonetheless. For many years Catherine struggled with what felt, to her, like a contradiction in her identity—an identity in which she felt she was a childless mother. Eventually she asked her parish priest to hold a mass for the children she had not physically conceived. Catherine felt certain that she had two children—a boy and girl—whom she had named and wanted to “introduce” to her family and friends in order to make her loss tangible for others to share.

Catherine: They don't understand that you would have had a loss ... of something that hasn't ever been. Even though in one's heart you would have conceived them. That's what Father J. said to me. You know, he said they were all conceived in your heart. They were conceived. I decided to hold a mass because I felt where am I to grieve? ... I'd like to have a mass for my unforgotten dreams and for all the unforgotten dreams in my family.... It was just absolutely amazing. And that became more important to me. This was huge. And then at the mass we were singing and I had picked out all the hymns and it was just beautiful. I felt that they deserved.... My children deserved to be known by their names. The fact that they [the children] didn't come didn't mean that they weren't wanted. So everybody who was important to me knew and knows their names now.

Catherine used this opportunity to appropriate a familiar public religious ritual to define her hidden sorrow in a very specific way for others to grasp. In the commemorative mass her “conceived of” children were materialized and symbolically embodied as if conceived.

Catherine: Because at the point I would have written a poem. When I wrote that in '96, for me that was the beginning of the end. The beginning of coming to....

J Coming to terms?

C: Coming to terms, or whichever you'd call it. I'm not comfortable with the word “terms” because I do live with it. And they are within me. You know the children that didn't come. The love is still contained within me.

J: Right, the potentiality was there all the time.

C: Oh yes, oh yes. So it was kind of realized and forgiven, and resolved.

Within myself, you know, letting them go. Letting them be free. Saying to my children, sort of at the end it's okay. I forgive ye.... It's a pity you didn't come but it's alright. I'm alright now.

Catherine's need to forgive the children for not coming imparts to them a measure of personhood. Her narrative was filled with coincidences involving the two names she had chosen and these anecdotes confirmed for her the existence and connection she felt with children who had not come but were nonetheless real. Even as she talks about letting go, her narrative is really about sustaining an identity. Pointing out the inadequacy of a phrase like "coming to terms," Catherine resists the idea that she must relinquish her embodied notion of herself as a mother. For women like Catherine who do not manage to conceive or adopt children, motherhood lingers as a presence of absence in their identities and sense of themselves.

Elsa: And it was really kind of important to me that we could grieve for the children that weren't born.... I mean my children haven't been born or died for whatever reason but I feel they are still very much there.

Like Catherine's story above, Elsa describes the sensation of continuity when she talks about grieving for children who were not conceived but are still very much a part of her lived reality. Both Elsa and Catherine suggest that accepting childlessness is not the same as accepting that they are not mothers. This differs from Marcia Inhorn's discussion of childless women in Egypt who forestall notions of social failure by remaining liminal, like pilgrims "searching" for the children who have not yet come (29). The women in my study claim an ongoing motherhood identity by reconfiguring themselves as *having* children who did not come. In so doing, they resist the stereotypes and stigma associated with being women who are "other than mother" (Letherby, *Other* 359). Grieving in this light recasts their experiences as conforming with the social imperatives, allowing them to claim to be mothers who have lost a child.

Elsa suggests that her children have died and will not be forgotten but this idea must be re-shaped in order to make sense of her infertility experience as a loss. Below Anne describes how she used an analogy to convey the pain she experienced to someone who she felt misunderstood her situation.

Anne: Well I had somebody say to me once "why don't you just adopt and don't do the IVF⁵? You've been through enough?" And that person had three kids. And I said I'm going to take away your three kids and murder them and you're going to have that heartache and that grief. That all consuming ... (pausing) I can't even explain it. That horror inside you. That pain.

I'm going to leave you with that. How would you feel now? Wouldn't you want your kids back? She said yes and I said that's how I feel everyday and that's how my husband feels. That's the only way to explain it. It's not just the loss of your dream. It's a sorrow that won't go away.

Like Elsa, Anne's illustration compares her loss to the death of a child. For women like Anne, their sense of loss is as tangible as death but the fact that children never came makes the grief difficult for people to understand. The context of a death provides a way of making sense of people's lack of understanding of the impact of infertility loss.

Lorna: People who have experienced a mother or father or brother or sister death know what that is like but this is a very different type of death and I always feel angry when I hear people say "they've lost a child and sure she has other children." I am absolutely so angry when I hear people say that. That is your child. You wanted that child equally as much as you wanted the ones that came before, the ones that came after. That child is a huge loss. That huge sense of loss will be there for ages and ages.

Lorna also describes the social or cultural notions about what constitutes legitimate forms of grief, suggesting there is an imagined hierarchy among experiences of loss. Like Anne's story above, Lorna expresses a lack of faith in people's capacity to understand the equation of absence with loss. All of the stories above employ powerful metaphors that draw on the social meaning of the death of a child in order to convey the emotions necessary to legitimate grief.

Stories like these raise questions about the relationship between subjectivity, embodiment and reproduction. Clearly Catherine's sense of being a mother was deeply embodied in a way that necessitated reconciliation with a body that did not produce children. Gayle Letherby notes the descriptive inadequacy inherent in a simplistic distinction between the "biological condition of infertility and the social condition of involuntary childlessness" (Letherby *Challenging* 277). From this standpoint, the experience of infertility, as an embodied phenomenon, challenges the unified subject of woman as mother. And yet the kind of grieving that Catherine describes also incorporates an embodied sense of maternity—a way that childlessness can be articulated with the embodiment of an ideal of motherhood.

Motherhood and (Re)Conceptions of Loss

The search for ways to validate motherhood through the recognition of loss and grief often begin with familiar institutional spaces and rituals or events.

Maureen: *And this priest is fantastic, actually, because he makes a big deal of everything. Every Mother's Day in the church he has hundreds of daffodils up there—hundreds. He buys daffodils in this bunch and he goes through "you're a mother, you're a daughter..." He goes through everything. But he said, this really was important because before all of those things you are you. You're an individual. So the last time everyone was gone, and I just said, "look, Father James, would you just include women who aren't mothers and who would like to become mothers, you know, and all the mothers who had lost babies ... and through IVFs like ... failed IVF cycles. Those are the people who weren't mentioned today. Motherhood that doesn't happen." He said "I never thought of it from that point of view." You know, and I really pictured that at the Mother's Day mass.*

While on one hand Maureen's narrative captures the issue of multi-subjectivity as women embody a number of social positions and relationships, what is missing in her search for legitimacy and recognition is "motherhood that doesn't happen." Her search for acknowledgment for this missing component suggests that the value of motherhood in a moral and religious context remains significant as a site of continuity and social validation (Becker 4).

One of the most concrete examples of a need to formally recognize sorrow and provide a space for grieving is an annual memorial service held for couples who have been unable to conceive. The idea of an event similar to the one Catherine organized for her own friends and family appealed to members of a support network called the National Infertility Support and Information Group (NISIG). The organization subsequently developed interdenominational memorials that have been held annually since 2003.

Kate: *And we find now that at the interdenominational services that even people who have adopted still haven't laid to rest their grief over failed treatment. Or even if they didn't go for treatment, to be able to acknowledge the fact they have never become a mother within, as in a biological mother.*

Kate describes the importance accorded to birth and suggests that becoming a mother "within" is still socially differentiated from other paths to motherhood.

The *Memorial to Unforgotten Dreams* is held in a garden called the *Leanbh* Memorial behind St. Benedict's Priory at Cobh, Co. Cork.⁶ Separated by hedges and walls from the rest of the cemetery, the *Leanbh* contains no headstones but is a quiet garden where stillborn and miscarried children are memorialized with flowers, shrubs and trees. NISIG asked that a space for

grieving and memorializing the losses in infertility be formally included in the mandate of the *Leanbb*. They were given permission from the Church to utilize the garden as a place to remember embryos lost after infertility treatment or the children who had not been conceived but were nonetheless wanted. This inclusion accorded an important public and institutional recognition that such loss could be tangible. It was a way of reaffirming motherhood through grief—recontextualized as the presence of children as “unforgotten dreams.”⁷ For some this has served as a form of spiritual recognition, filling a gap left by church communities that offer little or no recognition of loss or the legitimacy of grief for infertility.

A number of women I spoke to during the research talked about the personal things they had done to recognize or memorialize their “conceived of” children. Evelyn talked about nasturtiums in her garden being a constant reminder and described having transferred plants from one garden to another when she moved house as a symbol of the continuity of her grief. Gail was one of several women who gave names to embryos that failed to implant or implanted briefly and then were lost through early miscarriage.

(Re)Constituting Conceptions of Motherhood

Some women refer to themselves immediately after IVF as “pregnant until proven otherwise,” in an attempt to experience however briefly, the sensation of being a mother, and a means of validating that identity. Alexis describes her desire to experience this sensation of having achieved conception in order to have something on which to base both a feeling of motherhood and the grief of losing something.

Alexis: I've never had the embryos back. I've had the egg collection but I've never had the transfer... I've never had them inside me and I'm missing out on that bit. I know some of the girls would be on the IVF websites saying something about their embryos and I would be thinking god, you're so lucky to even have them inside. I'm probably better off waiting the three days and then if the embryos don't make it, they're gone instead of waiting the two weeks. But the embryologist said if he had his way everybody would wait until day three. You wouldn't have to wait the two weeks then because you'll know. And I was saying, “surely, the best place for the embryos is your womb,” and he said, “no, the conditions in the lab are just as good, if not better.”

Alexis found the sadness of never even contemplating the presence of embryos in her own body difficult to deal with emotionally. Although transferring

embryos two days after fertilization is common the embryologist assumes he is foreclosing grief for women by insisting that only embryos that survive in the Petri dish (*in vitro*) until the third day get transferred to the womb of the mother. His focus is on creating an ideal physical site for incubating rather than nurturing an embryo; what he is actually foreclosing is an opportunity for some women to experience a performative aspect of motherhood. His perspective aligns with Sarah Franklin's description of the often contradictory and variable meaning attached to "achieved conception" (145). For women the meaning of achieving conception is embedded in the significance of becoming a mother. For practitioners, however, it is the scientific and biological accomplishment of having fertilization and implantation occur through the *craft* of medicine—a scientific and valuable achievement in and of itself. In stories like the one told by Alexis, the scientific measure of success or failure can leave women feeling external to the process of their own procreative events when they embody the social role without being able to embody the biology as well. This leaves them not only bereft but somehow unable to situate their grief in ways that others will understand.

Lydia: But as I say when you do IVF there's almost a numb feeling. It's kind of a denial you know. It's when you get your period and it doesn't work it dulls your feeling. There's a delay in grief if you know what I mean. It's almost as if I couldn't cry. There's a complete numbness inside. It's like ... you're almost like ice inside because you've been building up to be so strong. But you know I think it may not work, it may not work and make yourself believe that. I couldn't cry. And I wanted to cry and I couldn't. And it doesn't hit you until about three months after, really hit you, you know? So we did the next one I suppose, we waited a year I would say until the next one.

Lydia describes the delayed reaction of sorrow and grief she felt as she worked through her own denial both before and after IVF as a kind of protective cloak.

Treatment failure, and the grief that accompanies it, can also be re-framed in terms of pregnancy loss.

Donna: After my last embryo transfer ... and it didn't work, and I had said to my siblings and quite a few close friends of mine that I'd been for infertility treatment. And when I said that it had failed, I didn't get much empathy from them. It was like it really didn't matter. Well I rang the Miscarriage Association and I asked their permission to say ... could I say I had a miscarriage.... And I felt the recognition of my baby would

be.... And they were absolutely brilliant. They said, "of course you can, because you did have embryos inside you and you don't know, they might have implanted for a few days." I went home to my hometown and I told my siblings and they hugged me and they cried. But I thought that was very sad that the grief of infertility was not ... that I had to say I'd had a miscarriage to get my needs met.

Donna seeks an alternative but authoritative, medicalized definition of what happened, allowing her to shift the meaning from a domain of "failure" to a domain of loss through which she might gain legitimate access to empathy. In other words, a pregnancy or a "baby" can be lost whereas an IVF treatment only fails. The miscarriage support network relies on the biological definitions of conception and implantation to assure her that her grief and her claim to motherhood are real experiences. The process of IVF itself makes the embryos visible in ways that complicate a relationship between bodies and claims to maternal process and identity. A number of women in my study re-contextualized their treatment failures as miscarriages in an effort to make sense of their embodied motherhood in the absence of a conception.

Conclusion

Grief can make room for alternative forms of maternal legitimacy even in the absence of wider social recognition of loss. For some people grief is an emotional mechanism that forestalls or mediates the sensation of "failure" to conceive by re-constituting a failure to conceive as the loss of a child. I have argued here that redefining the absence of conception as an absence of children through grieving creates a conceptual space that legitimates a sensation of material loss and sorrow. At the same time however, grief is a medium of resistance to societal perceptions that women who do not conceive have not embraced the values of parenthood, family and generational continuity that are hallmarks of Irish social life

Even in the absence of *becoming* a mother some women still experience, subjectively, a sense of *being* that is motherhood. This represents a challenge to the meanings of reproduction that remain anchored to subjectivities powerfully inscribed on the gendered bodies of women and men. The kind of conflicted subjectivity in which women feel as if they are "always already" mothers creates a need for social validation of their conformity with an ideology of motherhood and embodied social values in Ireland. Through thoughtful redefining and attention to their sensations of grief, many women in my study simultaneously challenged and reaffirmed the social convention that all women will be made mothers by conception. These women's stories contest the notion that

motherhood begins with a biological or social moment and challenge conception as a material achievement defined and understood through a medical or scientific lens.

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¹Social scientists in a number of disciplines, including anthropology, gender and feminist studies, acknowledge the importance of narrative in revealing the complexity of multiple subject positions (Holstein and Gubrium 11-15). As James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium suggest in their collected volume *Inside Interviewing: New Lenses, New Concerns*, interview research is “more than a simple information gathering operation: it’s a site of, and occasion for, producing knowledge itself” (4).

²The Constitution of Ireland, as written in 1939, enshrines a value associated with the heterosexual, nuclear family, protecting marriage and ascribing rights to the family unit. Women’s gendered responsibilities are spelled out succinctly in Articles 2. 1° and 2.2° which state “In particular, the State recognizes that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved ... The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home” (http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/attached_files/Pdf%20files/Constitution%20of%20IrelandNov2004.pdf).

³Althusser refers to interpellation as a kind of “hailing” in which someone responds to a call because they know themselves to be the person being hailed. It is through this process that they become the subject of the hail. Althusser points out that because of the ‘always already’ nature of subjectivity there is no temporal sequence to such recognition. It is a matter of at once knowing you are the subject and being the subject (Althusser 48).

⁴I employ the term post-Catholic to describe an era in which Catholicism is deconstructed as a source of social influence in the same way as post-modernism can critique and understand the constructedness of modernism.

⁵*In vitro* fertilization.

⁶*Leanbh* means ‘child’ in the Irish language.

⁷Linda Layne describes the making of memories in the context of pregnancy loss and miscarriage in the US. She notes that this kind of “memory making is pro-active” since memories, in this case, are constructions rather than reconstructions (129).

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