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Gender Differences in the Responses of Parents to Their Daughters’ Non-marital Pregnancy

Abbey Hyde

Introduction

This paper will present data on the experiences of fifty-one unmarried pregnant women in disclosing news of their pregnancies to their mothers and fathers. An argument will be presented suggesting that patterns of disclosure to mothers and fathers, and their responses to news of the pregnancy, differed along gendered lines. Mothers’ and fathers’ differing responses suggest divergent priorities with regard to their daughters’ role in society for mothers, their daughters needed to experience life beyond the traditional mothering role, while fathers were primarily concerned that their daughters would subscribe to the traditional social arrangement in which reproduction is embedded, and which supports patriarchal structures.

A small number of Irish studies on non-marital childbearing have included parental involvement in a daughter’s pregnancy in relation to parents’ awareness of the pregnancy, their initial responses to news of the pregnancy, and the level of support they offered (Creegan, 1967; Rynne and Lacey, 1983; Darling, 1984; O’Hare et al., 1987; Flanagan and Richardson, 1992). In general, findings indicated that mothers tend to be informed more frequently and at an earlier stage than fathers. Where parents’ initial reactions to the pregnancy had been investigated, these had often been limited by analysing mothers’ and fathers’ responses collectively (Creegan 1967, Darling, 1984) or mothers’ responses only (Rynne and Lacey, 1983). This obviates an understanding of gender differences in responses that might arise between mothers and fathers. In terms of parental support, where levels had been analysed separately for mothers and fathers (Rynne and Lacey, 1983; Flanagan and Richardson, 1992), mothers were found to be marginally more supportive than were fathers.

No studies were located, either nationally or internationally that offered a qualitative analysis of the differing responses of mothers and fathers to news of their daughters’ non-marital pregnancy. This obscures any gender differences that might arise between each parent’s reaction, and the basis for such differences. This paper will focus on how parents’ responses took on a specific gendered character. The gendered character of disclosure of and responses to the pregnancy was cross-cut by social class, which impacted on the extent to which non-marital pregnancies were problematised by participants’ parents. However, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to include a class analysis here.

Methodological Stance

The present study is part of a larger project investigating unmarried women’s experiences of pregnancy and the early weeks of motherhood. Fifty-one women were selected from the pre-natal clinic of a major maternity hospital in Dublin. The criteria for entry to the study were that potential participants would be unmarried to the father of the foetus and be first time mothers-to-be. The women’s ages ranged from sixteen to thirty-six; twelve of the women were under twenty when they gave birth. The social class background of participants varied, however the majority were working-class. While variations in age and social class enhanced the richness of data, qualitative samples of this kind do not aim to generalise to the wider population, but rather aim to provide an understanding of events which may then be compared with findings from other contexts.

The process of selection was as follows: at the pre-natal clinic, midwifery staff invited potential participants to meet me and discuss the study. Women were informed that the decision to participate or not need only be made after they had spoken to me and acquired details of the study. In all, ninety women were invited to take part in the study, of which seventy-eight agreed. Fifty-one women were eventually interviewed; this wastage rate compares well with similar studies where participants were interviewed in their own homes (Phoenix, 1991). Participants in the present study were interviewed over two separate occasions: firstly in the later stages of pregnancy, and secondly, approximately six weeks after the birth. The interviews were conducted during 1992 and 1993.

In order to understand the experiences of participants, a qualitative approach from a pluralist feminist standpoint position was adopted. This feminist standpoint is based on the notion that human activity structures and sets limits on understanding (Harding, 1989). Underpinning the standpoint position is the view that the dominance of conceptual schemes based on male perspectives of the social world has meant a partial and distorted understanding of events, which can only be redressed by uncovering an understanding of the world from the perspective of women’s activities. Earlier theoretical models of patriarchy as a universal oppression were later seen to underestimate differences among women’s experiences in terms of class, race, sexual identity and so forth. This
Patterns of Disclosure and Responses along Gendered Lines

The structure of participants’ immediate families varied, and this may have had some bearing on the pattern of disclosure to parents. While only one participant’s mother was dead, ten participants’ fathers were deceased. A further nine had parents who lived separately and in another case the father was in prison. Nonetheless, both parents were told together in only seven cases. Where parents were told separately, in all but one instance mothers were informed first, and, although the immediate dread for most participants on discovery of the pregnancy was telling the mother, most had greater difficulties with telling the fathers when the time came to do so. As has been noted in other studies referred to earlier, mothers were almost always informed about the pregnancy prior to fathers.

Mothers - Disclosure and Responses

All but seven participants informed their mothers of the pregnancy directly themselves. In eight cases, mothers (though not fathers) were aware at the early stages that their daughters thought they might be pregnant and were either waiting for the results of a pregnancy test, or were considering getting one done. There was little or no inhibition here, on the part of mother and daughter in discussing the possibility of a pregnancy.

Mothers responded in a variety of ways to news of their daughters’ pregnancies. These responses are summarised as follows:

In seven cases, expressions of pleasure and delight at the news were voiced, and the pregnancy was expressed as something positive. Typically the response here was:

Lorna: She welled up, and it was great ... She was delighted. (Twenty-nine-year-old salesperson)

In ten instances, negative views of the pregnancy were not forthcoming, yet pleasure at news of the pregnancy was not expressed. The pregnancy was constructed as acceptable and not, for the most part, seen as a problem. An example of this type of response was:

Rebecca: I had to get me sister to tell ma because I felt I was letting her down, but ma didn’t feel like that.

AH: What did she say?

Rebecca: She said it was grand. It was okay. (Twenty-two-year-old unemployed)

The pregnancy was seen by eighteen mothers as negative, but the mother was calm and supportive. The mother concentrated on providing support for the daughter in what she perceived to be a difficult situation, without dwelling on the circumstances in which the pregnancy arose, as in Celine’s case:

Celine: She says, ‘Right, it’s something we’ll have to deal with now. There’s nothing we can do now. It’s happened.’ She was very calm. (Seventeen-year-old leaving certificate pupil)

In fifteen instances, the mother was openly negative about the pregnancy and the circumstances in which it arose, as exemplified by Trish’s mother:

Trish: But like she was very upset and she says, ‘I can’t believe this is happening.’ Like this, ‘this is like a nightmare.’ She was upset because she didn’t think I’d be that stupid, this that and the other. ‘How could you?’ and bla bla bla. (Twenty-two-year-old receptionist)

Overall, the responses indicated that some women had little or no misgivings about approaching their mothers with news of the pregnancy, even at the stage where the pregnancy had not yet been confirmed, suggesting a considerable degree of openness. Furthermore, while the vast majority of mothers were less than delighted with the news, a sizeable minority indicated acceptance.

Fathers - Disclosure and Responses

In the case of fathers, the pattern of disclosure differed from that of mothers. Participants were far less likely to reveal news of the pregnancy directly to their fathers. Of the thirty-seven fathers in question (ten were deceased, and four had
no contact with their daughters), only fourteen women told their fathers directly, and in seven of these cases, participants told both parents together.

Only four fathers expressed pleasure that their daughter was pregnant, and just six fathers indicated acceptance of the pregnancy where neither pleasure nor displeasure was expressed. In situations where the pregnancy was defined as problematic, seven fathers were calm and supportive, while sixteen fathers were initially overtly negative about the pregnancy. Negative responses were proportionately higher among fathers than mothers since there were fewer fathers involved. More significantly, fathers' negative responses tended to be expressed far more strongly than those of mothers, and fathers took longer to 'recover' from the news than did mothers.

Where mothers had conveyed news of the pregnancy to fathers, in five cases the fathers never, throughout the entire pregnancy, directly acknowledged their awareness of the pregnancy to their daughters. In some cases, fathers withdrew from all interactions with their daughter for days and sometimes weeks after the fathers became aware of the pregnancy. In other situations where fathers openly responded to news of the pregnancy initially, a period of social disengagement with their daughters followed in some instances. In Frances' case below, the father withdrew from interaction with the entire family (who showed support for Frances) for three weeks:

Frances: But for about three weeks, he didn't speak - it wasn't only me. He didn't speak to anybody in the house. He had to come to terms with it in his own way. And like no matter what anybody says to him, you're not going to change him. You have to let him rant and rave. (Twenty-six-year-old nurse's aide, engaged prior to the pregnancy)

In another case a father withdrew from interaction immediately on discovering news of the pregnancy before openly expressing his views but made these known when he resumed interaction with his daughter some time later.

The Basis of Concern - Mothers

Where mothers and fathers expressed negative reactions to news of the pregnancy, their distress was usually rooted in different factors. Participants' accounts suggest that mothers often voiced misgivings about the lost life opportunities and life difficulties that the daughters might experience as a result of the pregnancy, especially if the participant was an adolescent or in her early twenties:

Jenny: You see I was over in Germany for two years and I had all these goals. I was going to do this and I was going to do that ... I think it [mother's response] was worse than crying, the words that she said, 'How could you let yourself down?' It wasn't so much, 'You let me down,' or 'God, what will the neighbours think?,' but, 'How could you let yourself down?' - more concerned about me, what's going to happen in my life. In a way, she tries to live her life through mine. She wants me to have everything that she didn't have. (Twenty-three-year-old, unemployed)

AH: How was your mother about it?

Orlaith: Very upset, cause my brother was born before she got married and she got a lot of hassle from people and getting money and sent here and there so ... just, she didn't want it for me. (Seventeen-year-old waitress)

AH: What was it that annoyed her most about the pregnancy?

Mattina: She feels that the I've thrown away my life, that I'm far too young, and could have got on. (Sixteen-year-old school pupil)

A small number of mothers were concerned about practicalities, such as where their daughter and her baby would live, especially if the parental home could not easily accommodate another inhabitant, although, regardless of how overcrowded the house was, all mothers offered to accommodate their daughters. The primary concern in the short-term for at least five mothers was how their husbands would respond to the news. In such instances, mothers shared with their daughters the anxiety about disclosure, and this seemed to preoccupy them more than concerns about the pregnancy. Interestingly, according to participants' accounts, the specific issue of the daughter not being married did not tend to be expressed as a high priority for concern by most mothers, although there were accounts where mothers' disappointment in relation to the daughters' unmarried status was in evidence. Where mothers' responses were strongly openly negative, they tended to be voiced more so in relation to how the daughters' lives would be affected by the pregnancies, rather than their (the mothers') own sense of personal hurt.

The Basis of Concern - Fathers

Fathers' responses took a different tone than those of mothers. Fathers were rarely reported to have voiced concerns, as respondents' mothers did, about how a daughter's life would be affected by the pregnancy. Where fathers were informed directly or where they acknowledged their awareness of the pregnancy to the daughter, negative reactions were almost always expressed in terms of the father's own personal hurt and disappointment. In Stephanie's case, her father made her feel that the pregnancy was deliberately planned specifically to agitate him. In Frances' case, the father was much more explicit in his sensation that the pregnancy arose intentionally in order to undermine his authority.

Stephanie: Me da was very hurt over it. That's what he kept telling me that he was very hurt. I felt very guilty over that. It was like I had went out and
done it purposely, you know, just to get at him, but it wasn’t like that at all, but it was kind of the way he started making me feel. (Twenty-three-year-old, unemployed, engaged prior to the pregnancy)

Frances: He said, ‘I heard about you. I’m very disappointed in you.’ ... He said [to the sisters] I’d planned it. They [sisters] told me all this afterwards - I planned the pregnancy, that I was a selfish bitch and I always did what I wanted anyway. Em, basically he said everything, he couldn’t possibly have said anything worse, you know. I had done it to get the better of him. (Twenty-six-year-old nurses’ aide, engaged prior to the pregnancy)

Mary below, admitted to her father that she had actively planned the pregnancy, and this deliberate defiance was interpreted as less acceptable to the father than an unanticipated pregnancy would have been:

Mary: I told him, you see, that I really wanted a baby anyway, and I said that if it wasn’t with [partner] I’d probably have a baby with somebody anyway ... You see, I think the fact that we had planned it was even worse like, that if we had ‘got caught’, that that might have been acceptable, but the fact that here I was telling him that this is what I want [laughs]. (Thirty-three-year-old public relations officer, engaged prior to the pregnancy)

In two cases, fathers focused on their daughters’ moral character, implying that the pregnancy was a consequence of the daughters being sexually loose women, who liberally made themselves available to men:

AH: What sort of things did he [the father] say?

Mary: ‘You’re a slut. You’d open your legs to anything.’ ... ‘Got yourself plugged.’ (Twenty-year-old, unemployed)

AH: What kind of things did your father say when you told him?

Trish: It was really, ‘Oh how could you let yourself do this,’ and, ‘You’d go off with anyone like that,’ and, ‘How long are you going out with him? You don’t even care do you? You could have been with anyone.’ Trying to make out I was some bloody whore. (Twenty-two-year-old receptionist)

The possibility of marriage before the birth was raised in six cases. In four instances, fathers asked their daughters if they intended to marry, implying that they ought to marry. In two cases, mothers raised the issue; in one such case the participant, who was engaged prior to becoming pregnant, suspected that the topic was raised by the mother to appease the father:

Frances: The only thing she [mother] said to me was, ‘Are you getting married before the birth?’ I said, ‘No,’ and she said, ‘But sure, you were going to get married anyway before you knew you were pregnant.’ ... I think from her meself that if she thought she could turn around and say to me father, ‘Hold on - they’re getting married,’ it would have eased the blow on

him maybe. (Twenty-six-year-old nurses’ aide, engaged prior to the pregnancy)

In another instance, a father lamented that the passage to motherhood would mean that his daughter could not now marry in the way he had intended for her. The symbolic ‘giving away’ of his daughter’s sexuality to another man at marriage was contaminated for the father since her sexual activity was now exposed:

Pauline: I came home, my dad was upstairs in bed sobbing ...

AH: What did your father say?

Pauline: He said, ‘All the things I had planned for you.’ And I said, ‘What do you mean by that?’ and he said, ‘A wedding and everything.’ And I said, ‘That can’t change, you know’, and he said, ‘No, it’s different now.’ (Twenty-year-old secretary)

Similarly, Mary felt that marriage after the birth of the baby would come too late to negate her father’s disappointment, while her mother was seen to be more likely to adapt to the situation:

Mary: Even if we do get married eventually, it won’t make a lot of difference because of the fact that we have had a baby. I think my father would have more of a problem getting over it than my mother ... But at the end of the day, like, mothers and daughters ... they can empathise, and they can feel more for them, whereas fathers tend to be more proud ... When I got engaged he felt I would get married sometime, but I think he feels at this stage that we’ll probably never get married, and I don’t know that it would redeem [partner] in his eyes even if we did. (Thirty-three-year-old public relations officer, engaged prior to the pregnancy)

When asked what they thought it was about the pregnancy that upset their fathers so much, a number of women (especially the younger ones) mentioned that to their fathers, they still represented young girls on whom the fathers doted:

Annie: My father dotes on me. I’m his favourite. There’s no favourites in the family, but I’m the youngest. I’m the baby to him. (Twenty-year-old secretary)

Emma: To me da, I’m still his baby cause I’m the oldest girl. He’ll never let me go like ... My da couldn’t believe it like. He kept on saying, ‘No, she’s not.’ Like, ‘My little girl,’ like ... He was disgusted with me and he was upset and he was crying. (Nineteen-year-old machinist)

Mothers were mentioned far less often with regard to moving from the ‘little girl’ status to that of adult. Sharpe (1994, p.85) has noted fathers’ need to preserve their daughters’ innocence, and the sense in which daughters ‘belong to fathers twice over, as children and as females’. This issue of patriarchal control by fathers over daughters will be expanded on in the discussion section.
Discussion

A central theme in the preceding data was that the pattern of disclosure to, and responses of parents to a daughter's non-marital pregnancy took on a specific gendered character. I argued that where concerns were expressed by mothers and fathers in relation to the pregnancy, such concerns were rooted in differing perspectives on women's position in relation to their reproductive functions.

In an attempt to understand the differing responses to news of their daughter's pregnancy by mothers and fathers, it is useful to draw on the work of anthropologists who have explored the ways in which tribal kinships are structured around marriage based on the exchange of women. The marriage system that existed in Ireland in the earlier part of this century is explored and linked to the gendered responses noted in the present study.

Claude Levi-Strauss (1969, p.497) in The Elementary Structures of Kinship suggested that the transfer of women between males establishes the 'supreme rule of the gift'. In this sense the daughters (the 'gifts') are exchanged from their fathers to their husbands on marriage. As 'gifts', they are seen to act as mechanisms that defuse hostilities between male exchangeurs and are thus instrumental in developing networks of relationships among groups of people.

Boose (1989) suggests that daughters incorporate what the anthropologist Victor Turner (1969, p.85) described as the attributes of those in liminal situations and roles, or 'liminal personae' ('threshold people') within their culture, insofar as daughters are located in intermediate positions in cultural space. 'Liminal personae' are located in necessarily ambiguous positions, according to Turner, because such persons remain outside of the network of classification that usually confers states and positions within a society. Turner (p.95) contended that individuals in liminal roles are likely to manifest themselves as 'dangerous and anarchical' to those involved in the maintenance of 'structure' within that society. Turner (p.95) defines this threat as 'the powers of the weak'. The 'betwixt and between' (Turner, 1969, p.81) positions that daughters occupy make them a threat to family and community members while they remain unmarried (Boose, 1989). Boose (1989, p.67-68) explains why this is so in the following quotation:

Inside patriarchal construction, community and family can be rescued from their own potential violence only when daughters become wives - when the liminal danger of virginal menstruation shed within the paternal house is countered by the antidote of hymenal blood shed inside the husband's. It is therefore not the daughter's passage to adolescence that receives the ritual of community sanction. The ritual that legitimizes the daughter is the same one that eradicates her daughterhood and relocates her dangerous fertility inside the authorized status of wife/mother.

Within the traditional family structure, the daughter was thus viewed as 'the temporary sojourner within her family, destined to seek legitimation and name outside its boundaries' (Boose, 1989, p.21), and in an ambiguous position until she did so.

Since the famine period in the 1800s until the early half of the twentieth century the position of unmarried adult daughters in the Irish situation bore more than a passing resemblance to the system within tribal groups explored by anthropologists presented above. What occurred was the transfer of women from their fathers to their husbands at marriage in exchange for a dowry, which was paid by the bride's father. This system of exchange centred around 'matchmaking' which is vividly described by anthropologists Arensberg and Kimball (1968) in County Clare in the 1930s. In spite of possible doubts about the validity (Gibbon, 1973, Peillon, 1982) and representativeness (Brown, 1985, Fitzpatrick, 1985) of the accounts presented by Arensberg and Kimball, it has been acknowledged that their depiction of life in rural Ireland bears a strong resemblance to records of rural life reported elsewhere in Ireland at that time (Brown, 1985).

In the contemporary period, both sons and daughters were subjected to the father's power until well into adulthood (and for males often well into middle age) and each could be described as 'liminal personae' in Turner's (1969) sense until they married, or for the duration of their lifetimes if they remained single. Because of the large numbers of men and women who remained unmarried throughout their lives after the famine until the 1960s, the sexualities of these 'liminal personae' were kept in check by the strict doctrines of the Catholic Church, who persistently preached about the dangers of sex (O'Flahain, 1954). Judging by relatively low levels of non-marital births from the time of the famine to the 1970s, it appears that people generally behaved as priests advised (Connell, 1968). The chastity of unmarried peasant Irish women was described variously as, "remarkable", "ferocious", "complete and awful", a virtue no longer, but a "blight", [and] a "dreadful evil" (Connell, 1968, p.138). These definitions correspond well to Turner's (1969, p.95) description of 'liminal personae' as frequently regarded to be 'dangerous, insipid, or polluting to persons, objects, events, and relationships that have not been virtually incorporated into the liminal context'.

The marriage norms operating in Ireland described above, bear some similarities to Levi-Strauss' notion of gift exchange within kinships, insofar as the traffic of women was practised in both contexts. Gayle Rubin (1975, p.174) has critiqued Levi-Strauss' structuralist perspective on kinship arguing that, since it is women who are being transferred, they do not benefit from the 'quasi-mystical power of social linkage' that stems from such exchanges. Rubin locates the roots of women's oppression in the system of exchange of women.
through marriage. She further suggests that the 'exchange of women' concept is very powerful because it locates women's oppression in the traffic in women instead of in the exchange of merchandise. If this exchange of women is central to women's oppression as Rubin suggests, then non-marital childbearing, in circumventing the traditional male-dominated transactions in women, has wide-ranging implications for male and female power relations.

There are clear threats to patriarchal structures when a breakdown in traditional relations between men and women occurs, and the daughter's 'dangerous fertility' (dangerous for patriarchy) bypasses the male-controlled route of marriage. Even in contexts of more liberal rules of conduct governing marriage than occurred earlier this century, marriage continues to serve the interests of patriarchy through the expropriation of female labour in the domestic mode of production (Walby, 1990), the maintenance of female dependency, and the male appropriation of biological children irrespective of the father's role in parenting (Chester, 1991).

Conclusion

At the time when data were collected for the present study, we were only a few generations beyond the 'exchange' of women for a dowry through arrangements made by their fathers, although marriage norms had changed dramatically compared with those described by Arenberg and Kimball in the 1930s (Whelan and Fahey, 1994). There remain the remnants of the traditional system in the 1990s where fathers 'give away' their daughters in marriage, and newly married women interchange their father's surname for that of their husband's. It is being argued here that the differing responses of participants' fathers and mothers to news of a daughter's pregnancy explored within this chapter, arise as a residue of the kinship system where fathers controlled the exchange of their daughters to other men in marriage, and ensured the smooth reproduction of patriarchal relations from one generation to the next. Evidence provided here suggests that fathers continued to rely on their daughters to sustain the social organisation of reproduction which they (the fathers) were dominant in defining.

When a pregnancy arose, fathers were often deeply personally hurt and disappointed, in some cases openly crying at the news. It appears that, as the fathers saw it, in their inability to control fertility, daughters had in turn failed and exposed their fathers as inadequate protectors of the daughter's sexuality, and had upset the established social arrangement for reproduction. With changing attitudes to sex outside marriage, fathers were likely to be aware that to expect their daughters to remain virgins until marriage was unrealistic in the changing cultural climate towards sexuality. A father could, however, still look forward to symbolically 'giving away' his daughter to the sexual protection of another approved man through marriage, without the need to know much about her sexual career prior to this.

Participants' mothers' concerns about the pregnancy differed from those of fathers, and instead centred on the lost life chances their daughters might experience as a consequence of what they (the mothers) felt to be inappropriate staging of the pregnancy. What this suggests is that participants' mothers were concerned that their daughters would not be in a position, as a consequence of the pregnancy, to avail themselves of opportunities in life beyond the traditional role of mother, such as developing career and life chances, which many of the mothers themselves had forfeited to their childbearing functions. Fathers, on the other hand, were concerned that their daughters were moving away from women's traditional role vis-a-vis men, that is, being wives before they became mothers. Thus, at a broad level, where concerns were expressed by parents, what the differing apprehensions of mothers and fathers represent are differing perspectives on the role of women in society.

Discussion Topics

1. In what ways do the traditional marriage ceremony and associated rituals reflect male dominance?

2. Why do you think that more women are choosing to become mothers but not wives?

3. What advantages and disadvantages does legal marriage have for women and men?

4. How do you explain the different responses of mothers and fathers to their daughters non-marital pregnancy?

Notes

1. In order to protect the anonymity of participants, all names have been changed and some less common occupations have been altered to similar ones within the same socio-economic group according to the current Irish six-point scale.

2. The notion of 'liminal phase' of rites de passage was first defined by Arnold van Gennep (1960). The liminal phase was seen as an intervening period after which an individual had detached from an earlier fixed position in the social structure, or set of social conditions, but had not yet re-aggregated, or re-incorporated into a new well-defined and 'structural' type.

3. The analysis here will confine itself to this period. The marriage customs before the famine did appear to differ from those which followed, but were nonetheless strongly patriarchal (see Connolly, 1985).
4. A 'match' has been defined as a 'contractual marriage made by the parents of families of the marrying parties and involving the disposal of property' (Arensberg and Kimball, 1968, p.105). This definition, however, obscures the differing degrees of control exhibited by mothers and fathers over the arrangement, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

5. Males, it seems, were as likely to suffer as females, would be called 'boys' until they married, which was often well into their middle years and were strongly subjected to their fathers' control (Connell, 1968). However, after they married, they became the patriarchs who in turn controlled their children's lives until well into adulthood.

References and Further Reading


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