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6 Irish Television and the Assemblage of Personal Narratives of Teenage Pregnancy and Abortion

ABSTRACT

A pregnancy can be deemed a crisis for a number of different reasons. For several years in the Republic of Ireland, a pregnancy was automatically labelled a crisis if the pregnant woman wasn't married. Media coverage of scandals which centred on unplanned teenage pregnancies in the 1980s and 1990s caused some Irish people to reflect on the conservative principles of Catholicism with which they were raised and the consequences of those in the lives of others. This chapter draws on research which examined the presence, and absence, of personal narratives of crisis pregnancy from specific texts which aired on Ireland's Public Service Broadcaster, Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ). These texts are *The Teens' Midwife* (2013), *50,000 Secret Journeys* (1994) and footage from *RTÉ News* and *Prime Time* for the twelve-month period from July 2015 to June 2016. These texts are illustrative of the extent to which societal attitudes and political stances towards teenage pregnancy and abortion in Ireland have evolved over a twenty-two-year period.

Context and crisis

In this chapter we present research which examined the presence within non-fiction Irish television of personal narratives of young women who had suffered a 'crisis' pregnancy. Studying narratives such as those that surround unplanned pregnancy has the potential not only to build empathy for young people confronting a crisis situation but also to inform support communication, protection campaign efforts and intervention efforts in both clinical and non-clinical settings (Gray 2015). This form of study also acknowledges the way that identity is assembled in autobiographical

narrative (Bruner 1987) whilst simultaneously being assembled in cultural-historical narrative. In the Republic of Ireland (Ireland), Article 41.2 of the Constitution illustrates the pervasiveness of a particular cultural-historical narrative:

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. (Article 41.2.1)

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. (Article 41.2.2)

By allowing the words ‘woman’ and ‘mother’ to be interchangeable, the Constitution implies that the role of the Irish woman is one of nurturer. Simultaneously, there is a powerful gender assumption, formally recognized by the state, that women are associated with life ‘within the home’, with that role taking priority over ‘engage[ing] in labour’.

Crisis pregnancy has played a recurring role in public and private experiences of Irish womanhood. Historical narratives of crisis pregnancy have been muted to some extent due to the stigma associated with pregnancy outside of marriage. From the eighteenth to the late twentieth centuries in Ireland, many young women who became pregnant out of wedlock were sent to work in places such as the Magdalene Laundries as punishment, their children taken for adoption (a cultural history powerfully highlighted in the novel *The Lost Child of Philomena Lee* (Sixsmith 2010)). The passage of the Eighth Amendment to the 1937 Irish Constitution in October 1983 added a further layer of complexity in crisis pregnancy. The amendment ‘acknowledg[ed] the right to life of the unborn, with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother’ (Government of Ireland 1983). The following year, two crisis pregnancy narratives played out in both local and national Irish media, challenging traditional attitudes formed in a patriarchal society underpinned by Catholicism.

In January 1984, fifteen-year-old Ann Lovett bled to death whilst giving birth alone beside a grotto of the Virgin Mary in Granard, Co. Longford. Her baby son also died. A few months later in April 1984, the body of a baby boy was washed ashore on Caherciveen beach in Co. Kerry. The infant

had been stabbed to death. This discovery led the Gardaí¹ to Joanne Hayes, a twenty-five-year-old woman who had been having an affair with married man Jeremiah Locke and who was known to be pregnant. Hayes had given birth at her family farm near the town of Tralee; however, the baby had died, been wrapped in a plastic bag and buried on the farm. When Hayes told the Gardaí about the birth of her own baby and its death, there was an attempt to link her to the murder of the Caherciveen baby. Despite the discovery of the body of Hayes's baby on the family farm, the Gardaí maintained that Hayes was also the mother of the Caherciveen baby and thus responsible for his death.

The infanticide and stigma surrounding pregnancy outside of marriage created a discussion which was facilitated and fuelled by the media (Maguire 2001). Hayes was subjected to questions about her sexual history and menstrual cycles when being interrogated in court about the 'Kerry Babies' scandal. This demonization of Hayes occurred because – despite identifying as a Catholic woman – she did not behave in the manner of 'traditional' Catholic women. Hayes's sexuality and status as an unmarried mother constituted a challenge to Catholic patriarchy and its characteristics of male dominance, idealization of motherhood and control of female sexuality (Inglis 2002). Such events, to some extent at least, inspired 'problem-pregnancy' films in the 1980s and 1990s. These films worked to 'move beyond the individual, psychological focus of the maternal melodrama to challenge traditional Irish notions of women's sexuality' (Pramaggiore 2006: 111). However, in actual cases of crisis pregnancy, if a woman chooses to have an abortion before her pregnancy – the evidence of her sexuality – becomes public knowledge, she must either have the procedure in another jurisdiction or have it illegally in Ireland.

Whilst fictional representations of crisis pregnancy are commonly centred on the protagonist – the woman who is facing the crisis, her life and the world she inhabits – the voice of the protagonist is less clear in factual representations of teenage crisis pregnancy. Crisis pregnancy narratives with nameless protagonists such as the 'X Case' and the 'C Case' – which

1 The police force of Ireland.

occurred in 1992 and 1997 and in which teenage rape victims sought permission to travel in order to end unwanted pregnancies – marked a significant development in changing attitudes towards crisis pregnancy and abortion in Ireland at the commencement of a period of significant socio-economic change manifest in the ‘Celtic Tiger’ economy. This chapter explores the presence and absence of personal narratives in three ‘factual’ representations: *The Teens’ Midwife* (n.d. 2013), *50,000 Secret Journeys* (Dully 1994) and RTÉ News and *Prime Time* footage from July 2015 to June 2016.

Introducing the data sources

The Teens’ Midwife (n.d. 2013) was a two-part documentary which screened on RTÉ on 21 and 28 March 2013. It documented the work of ‘the teens’ midwife’, the first midwife in Ireland solely dedicated to supporting pregnant teenagers. The documentary was filmed at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Co. Louth, an area where, in contrast to the national tendency, rates of teenage pregnancy had remained elevated. Two of the participants were filmed as they became mothers for the first time, whilst the third was preparing for the arrival of a second child. They were introduced at various stages of their pregnancies from eleven- to thirty-three weeks’ gestation. Intimate moments of the births of their children were filmed and screened. These recordings of the teenage mothers were punctuated by commentary from the midwife regarding her role as a midwife who works exclusively with teenagers. In this commentary, the midwife articulates that she doesn’t advocate teenage sex; however, she teaches the young women under her care about fertility in order to prevent them from having a repeat pregnancy in the near future. She emphasizes the importance of the young women attending antenatal classes so they can learn about the ‘practicalities’ of birth and to lessen their fear of the unknown. The closing moments of the second episode of *The Teens’ Midwife* show the midwife holding a meeting with some of the teenage parents she cared for during their pregnancies who have since become young parents.

50,000 Secret Journeys (Dully 1994) aired as part of *The Abortion Debate* and documented the experience of three women who opted for an abortion when they faced a crisis pregnancy. The women were reflecting on their decision months, years and decades following their abortion; the documentary also included a short film about unmarried mothers and a studio debate. The programme was significant in presenting women who had experienced abortion speaking on camera about their personal experience. In contextualizing abortion in Ireland, viewers were informed that between 1983 and 1992 50,000 Irish women had travelled abroad in order to obtain an abortion. Clarifying information on Irish legislation was intertwined with the personal narratives of the three women. Two of the women had legal abortions, one in London in 1981, the other in Liverpool in 1993. The third woman had a backstreet abortion in London in 1962. As a text in and of itself, *50,000 Secret Journeys* humanized the statistics of anonymous Irish women who had experienced abortion. However, by following the women's narratives with a film on unmarried mothers in Ireland and an in-studio debate on abortion, the narratives of the women in the documentary are somewhat diluted in a sea of voices presumably lacking personal experience of crisis pregnancy.

News and current affairs footage from *RTÉ News* from the twelve-month period are diverse in form and content and proved illuminating in examining the presence and absence of young women's personal narratives of crisis pregnancy in non-fiction Irish television. Press and Cole (1999: 3) note that when women speak about abortion 'they participate in a cultural conversation in which the media are ongoing participants as well'.

Personal narrative, disequilibrium and re/assemblage

A pregnancy, and in particular an unplanned pregnancy, can disassemble and reassemble a personal narrative given the scale of change that occurs in the life of the narrator. Equilibrium is interrupted and, according to narrative theory, the person must go through the processes of degeneration and

improvement in order to reach a new state of being (Todorov & Weinstein 1969). In her interviews with teenage mothers about their experiences of pregnancy and motherhood, Middleton (2011) found that one of the most common themes amongst her interviewees was connecting past with present through structuring narratives.

In the dominant cultural narrative of Ireland, the Catholic faith and the moral beliefs associated with it have been heavily tied with the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922. This has led to the common gendered vision whereby Ireland is perceived as being a virgin mother, akin to the Virgin Mary. Following the Eighth Amendment, the cultural narrative of the Republic of Ireland encouraged women to exist 'as a function of their maternity' (Meaney 1991: 3). While this image was rejected by some women who engaged in Irish nationalist politics in the early twentieth century, others used it to articulate their own political spaces in a male-dominated landscape (Thapar-Björkert & Ryan 2002). Given the example of the 50,000 – the many Irish women who have not welcomed their pregnancies and who have, for whatever reason, rejected motherhood – it could be argued that the Catholic nationalist principles on which Ireland was founded bear little significance to the realities of Irish womanhood or indeed the realities of non-Irish women living in Ireland.

Gibbons notes that the traditional ideology of the Virgin Mary as the epitome for Irish women to aspire to stems from Anne Devlin, the faithful servant of Irish nationalist rebel Robert Emmet. Devlin refused to divulge confidential details surrounding Emmet's cause, and endured torture by the British authorities as a result. Irish women were thus encouraged to 'emulate' the silent, passive nature of the Virgin Mary as Anne Devlin had done (Gibbons 1986: 4). Thus, the suppression of personal narratives both historically and on non-fiction Irish television indicates that, although attitudes towards teenage pregnancy and abortion have become more accepting in Ireland, there still remains a belief that women who have faced such a 'crisis' should 'get on with it' – regardless of whether they've chosen to abort, adopt or carry the pregnancy to term and raise the baby – without dwelling on their personal feelings and emotions towards the situation in which they find themselves.

The personal experience of Amanda Mellet, who had to travel to the United Kingdom when she found out that her unborn child had a

fatal foetal abnormality, may contribute to constructions of the ‘criteria of rightness’ – a sense that abortion is acceptable in some circumstances but not in others – of those participating in and watching non-fictional debates on responses to crisis pregnancy. The United Nations Human Rights Committee found that Amanda Mellet was discriminated against by Irish legislation. The ‘criteria of rightness’ of any individual is likely to be contributed to by influential others who tend to be given prominence over ordinary citizens on public platforms such as non-fiction television. This prominence and the form of ‘binary oppositional debate’ that is televised poses the risk of excluding ‘the life world of women’ (Hillary Dully cited in Siggins 2016).

As is evident in other chapters in this collection, narrative interviews carried out with those personally affected by teenage pregnancy highlight the ways teenage mothers are stereotyped and put into one homogenous group to be judged by other members of society (Arai 2009; Middleton 2011). Young parents are commonly depicted as ‘unsupported and alone’ (Arai 2009: 159). Whilst Bell, Glover and Alexander (2013) acknowledged that teenage parenthood can evoke risk to the mother’s physical and mental health no less than parenthood for other age groups, discrimination of teenage mothers, in addition to the dominant discourse that positions teenage pregnancy as a crisis, can be just as dangerous as the early parenting (Arai 2009). ‘Spectacular’ depictions of pregnant and parenting youths on shows such as the US’s *Teen Mom* have been suggested to have a negative effect on the mental and physical health of teenage parents. These documentaries were suggested to be highly incongruent with lived experiences, including realities such as financial hardship. Young parents recognized that such representations informed public opinion to which others, including their health care providers, were not immune. This in turn resulted in teenage parents withdrawing socially, including delaying engagement with medical care. In Ireland a notion of being an ‘ideal daughter’, one in keeping with the discourse of the Virgin Mary, is evident; Department of Health researchers indicated that a common reason why some young women opted for an abortion was a desire to retain their status as a respectable daughter by preventing parental stigma. These women believed ‘if abortion is performed early and secretly’ they would spare their families and, in particular, their parents, the shame associated with premarital sex and teenage pregnancy

(Mahon, Conlon & Dillon 1998: 287). In this assemblage of media depiction, parental aspiration and individual reaction, young people's potential narratives are shaped in complex ways. It is to this complexity that the chapter now turns.

Irish television and exposure to personal narratives of pregnancy and parenting

The first episode of *The Teens' Midwife* attracted an individual audience share of 25.2 per cent and an average viewership of 336,000. The second episode, screened a week later, received an individual audience share of 21.1 per cent and an average viewership of 302,100. On average, 49.5 per cent of the audience consisted of adults aged fifty-five and older. Of the overall audience, 60.6 per cent were female and 54.3 per cent of the overall audience had a C2DE social ranking (consisting of skilled working class, working class and non-working individuals).

The teens' midwife informed the audience that she is the first point of contact for all of the young women in her care and that, following their first appointment with her, their pregnancy becomes 'official'. This implies that the women have decided to carry a pregnancy to term and, accordingly, the issue of abortion isn't discussed and is successfully managed out of the conversation in the context of the documentary. By choosing to continue with the pregnancy, the three teenage mothers who participated in the documentary maintained that they were 'taking responsibility' for their previous lack of responsibility which had led to their pregnancy. The midwife acknowledges that all three girls are in long-term relationships, commenting that at least this is better than a one-night stand. However, she also confirms that if she had her way, no teenagers would be having sex. Common themes in their narratives include shock at the news of the pregnancy within their family and dealing with parental disappointment; this was followed by a stated desire to accept responsibility by adapting their lives and accepting a role as parents at a young age. While little information

was provided about the personal circumstances of the young women, all three expressed their desire to 'better themselves'. One participant and her partner rented their own home and were both working in full-time jobs, whilst the other two lived at home with their immediate families. None of the participants were in education at the time they engaged with the documentary, but two expressed a desire to return to education in the future as both felt they had to abandon their studies when they found out they were pregnant.

One of the teenage mother's personal narratives is particularly complex. She became pregnant for the first time at age seventeen; despite being on the contraceptive patch. She discovered that she was pregnant for a second time six months after the birth of her son. These parts of her story were intercut with segments from the teens' midwife highlighting the lack of basic sex education knowledge her patients have, despite this participant clearly having sex education knowledge given her use of a contraceptive patch. Although she had the support of her parents, the documentary included a commentary by her mother following the birth of her second child, stating her wish not to be back in the same maternity ward in another fifteen months' time. Meanwhile, the new mother attempted to create her own narrative, claiming that she ignores those who judge her, as they haven't walked in her shoes, and she articulates her desire to become a midwife herself.

One of the most striking aspects of *The Teens' Midwife* is that the narratives of the teenage parents, and particularly the teenage fathers, are discursively constructed in their absence for the most part. There is a clear and observable focus on parental disappointment. The teenage mothers' parents discuss in detail the shock they felt upon finding out about their daughter's pregnancies, how they struggled with finding ways to tell family and neighbours and the sense of mourning they felt because their dreams for their daughters had been taken away from them. However, following the parents' initial disappointment, there is a sense that the pregnancy becomes their story. One participant is shown going shopping with her parents for baby related items; her mother selects the items, she generally agrees and her father pays. When another participant's baby girl is born, the baby is firstly handed to her mother who subsequently passes the baby

to her teenage daughter. Photographed moments in the post-labour ward tend to focus on the grandparents holding the baby, rather than the participants and their partners. The teen fathers' voices are disproportionately silent in both episodes. When they appear in the labour ward, they do so as passive spectators. Teenage fathers are the focus at one juncture in the documentary where the teens' midwife praises a group of young dads for taking on the responsibility and for looking after their partner. In being told 'they are great' for taking on the responsibility of fatherhood, stereotypical notions of teen dads fleeing their responsibilities are at once reinforced and dismantled. The teenage mothers and fathers are infantilized at many points in the documentary and criticized for having to be continually pursued to attend antenatal classes and to participate in the normalized medical journey of pregnancy.

At moments where the teen mothers' stories are at the fore, it was often clear that they are juxtaposed within an assemblage of what the expected social narrative around an unplanned pregnancy should be and what their actual feelings are towards their pregnancy. For instance, terms such as 'screwing up' and 'getting stung' are used by the teenage mothers to describe becoming pregnant, and this is followed by insightful warnings to other teenagers to not become pregnant. Yet the three participants are also clearly alive with anticipation and excitement as they await the arrival of their babies. This is reinforced by one participant's comment that she loves being a mother and wouldn't change it. There are glimpses of the teenage mothers as articulate and agentic, but these are not the focus of the accompanying commentary. For instance, two of the participants appear to birth their babies without the commonly used epidural anaesthesia. However, the associated commentary focuses on the unbearable nature of labour pain, rather than on the strength of their endurance and determination to birth their babies as naturally as possible.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given its earlier screening date (27 October 1994), the impact of bearing the shame and stigma associated with teenage pregnancy in Ireland were visible to a greater extent in *50,000 Secret Journeys*. Despite contrasting circumstances and outcomes, all three women spoke of the secrecy surrounding their abortions. The first woman spoke of her decision to have an abortion at age nineteen as directly related to her age and her lack of desire for a child at that time. She narrated her experience

of attending an anonymous clinic in London, accompanied by a friend. The second woman spoke to her reflections that 'deciding to' have a baby is a joint decision whereas, when opting for an abortion, the responsibility for the decision was solely hers. The third woman disclosed how, as a young immigrant in London who lacked a support network with the exception of an extremely religious relative, she resorted to desperate measures to end her pregnancy, opting for an abortion at a time when it was illegal in the United Kingdom. These women spoke articulately of their decisions to opt for an abortion, and of their experience in and beyond the experience.

The narratives within *50,000 Secret Journeys* were followed in the documentary by a segment on unmarried mothers, and an in-studio debate on abortion. The segment on unmarried mothers in Ireland opened with scenes from a 1974 edition of *7 Days*, which highlighted the stigma unmarried mothers in Ireland faced at that time. By 1993, one in five of all births in Ireland were to unmarried mothers, a shift attributed to a number of socio-economic factors: on the one hand, Ireland's decision to join the European Community in 1973 and the 'Celtic Tiger' economy that resulted; on the other hand documentaries such as *Banished Babies* and *Suffer Little Children* in the late 1990s brought to light abuse committed by the Catholic Church towards women and children in its care, causing some challenge to the dominant discourse of the Catholic Church and some space for less traditional lifestyles (Scherz 2010). However, while the extent of stigma associated with unmarried parenting may be less aggressive than once it was, the documentary provided evidence of some degree of animosity towards the group as the audience was informed that unmarried mothers cost the Irish state £105 million annually.

The documentary then focused specifically on teenage pregnancy. Dr Valerie Richardson, an academic at University College Dublin, highlighted that pregnant teenagers no longer felt pressure to marry the fathers of their unborn children: in 1962 there were 500 unmarried pregnant teenagers; by 1992 this figure rose to 2,500. Yet this implied acceptance of unmarried parenting was somewhat undermined by statistics that were then presented, indicating that 33 per cent of children in the care of the Local Authority had parents who were not married. In this, a negative connotation of the trend towards unmarried teenage parenting was left to 'speak for itself' – no young parents were invited to offer a narrative of their experiences in

coping with the demands of parenting and with decisions surrounding marriage at an early age.

In terms of media more generally, thirty-nine videos from *RTÉ News* and *Prime Time* were analysed. Each of these aired from July 2015 to June 2016. The word ‘abortion’ was used as a keyword search on the *RTÉ Prime Time* website, and thirty-seven videos from the above twelve-month period were found. A keyword search of the words ‘teenage pregnancy’ resulted in two further videos. Of the thirty-nine news reports, twenty-four were original reports, with the remaining fifteen being repeat/partially repeated reports broadcast in different news bulletins airing on the same day. Thirty-two people (excluding newsreaders, presenters and reporters) spoke on camera. Of the thirty-two contributors who spoke to camera, ten were pro-life and ten contributors expressed pro-choice views. Out of the thirty-two contributors, four have had either direct or indirect personal experience of a crisis pregnancy; three of these were in relation to experiences of fatal foetal abnormality. Of the media generated by the ‘teenage pregnancy’ keyword, the sole report was on the case of Miss Y, with that commentary being offered from her solicitor.

The absent presence of the pregnant and parenting teenager

The commentary thus far suggests that personal narratives of crisis pregnancy tend to be silenced on non-fiction Irish television; where the topic is the subject of media the focus can often be on the cost to the state which is incurred by unmarried parents or the risk they present to ‘decent’ standards of Irish nationhood. Personal narratives that featured in *The Teens’ Midwife* and *50,000 Secret Journeys* reveal how pregnancy can affect the woman’s perception of herself as a ‘good’ daughter and a ‘good’ mother – ‘good’ being defined in terms of the particular assemblage of womanhood established in the Irish Constitution. The unmarried status of a mother may no longer establish a pregnancy as a crisis; by association, the removal of the necessity to make an unfortunate marriage because of a pregnancy is positive.

However, this small-scale research project illustrates the problematic status of the voice of the protagonist – the teenage parent – in this changing public discourse. Pregnant and parenting teenagers appear, surrounded by ‘experts’ – medical, moral, political, educational – who speak at and for them. At the same time, ‘spectacular’ teenage parents are given voice, through portrayals in programmes that appear to speak for only a certain sub-group of parenting teenagers. The personal narratives of crisis pregnancy that do feature mostly focus on fatal foetal abnormality – a tragic, but possibly more palatable, rationale for abortion than ‘choice’. The absence of other personal narratives with alternative situations and outcomes suggests a subtle stigma towards those who confront pregnancy as crisis, regardless of their choices at this point in their life. Evidence suggests that those who stand on the ambiguous middle ground in the abortion debate are under-represented in comparison with their pro-life and pro-choice counterparts.

The dominant message assembled within *The Teens’ Midwife* was that while a teenage pregnancy, particularly for an unmarried Irish woman, was no longer considered the worst hardship a young Irish woman could endure, it was a hardship nonetheless. The language used throughout the documentary upholds stereotypical discourses of teenage parents as naïve and regretful and constantly in need of direction from ‘adults’. The concluding scenes of the second episode feature a number of young mothers whom the midwife had worked with during their pregnancies. When asked if they would do things differently if they ‘had their lives back again’, they all agreed that they had not anticipated becoming teenage parents and noted that they would have waited until they were older and wiser before bearing children. The teens’ midwife then articulates her desire for the teenage pregnancy rate to go down and hopes every time a teenage mother leaves her care she will never see her back again. However, she also explains that she has upcoming appointments with a new group of young women who have just found out about their pregnancies.

Thus, the audience has learned that this cycle will continue off camera with different versions of the same story. Furthermore, the theme of parental disappointment that occurred when the three participants shared the news of their pregnancies expands the idea of traditional gendered ideologies of Ireland and of the women of Ireland. The ideal of Irish women

being positioned as desexualized mother figures extends to Irish daughters. However, rather than being desexualized, Irish daughters must learn to control their sexuality and to conceal the potential visible outcomes of exploring their sexuality, which involve both pregnancy and abortion. When a crisis pregnancy does result, the young women portrayed offer a final word which is regret: if they could have their time again they would postpone parenting until they were 'older and wiser'. Yet this leaves unspoken the number of crisis pregnancies of 'older and wiser' women; it assumes that an alternative, non-parenting pathway for these three participants would be, somehow, 'better'.

Similarly, the three interviewees in *50,000 Secret Journeys* discussed the secrecy surrounding their abortions owing to the stigma surrounding the subject in Ireland, with the third interviewee claiming that the stigma surrounding abortion stems from a patriarchal society's desire to control women's sexuality. These women shared their desires for the issue of abortion to be approached in a direct and compassionate manner by the citizens of Ireland. The first woman who featured in *50,000 Secret Journeys* noted a persistent taboo surrounding abortion, even in the 'liberal circles' of the 1990s. Despite on the one hand trying to 'ignore the fact' of her abortion, on the other hand she also notes that she makes a conscious effort to discuss her personal experience of abortion, at least at times.

While both the teenage pregnancy rate and the number of Irish women seeking abortions in the United Kingdom have dropped steadily since the latter decades of the twentieth century, the tensions around the Eighth Amendment and the ambiguous illegality of the procedure in Ireland have remained a constant point of discussion in Irish public discourse. Research suggests that the majority of residents in the Republic of Ireland are placed on the middle ground in debates around crisis pregnancy and abortion (Gleeson 2015), with a substantial minority identifying as totally pro-life or totally pro-choice. Yet this minority is catered to by *RTÉ News* and *Prime Time*; the focus of crisis pregnancy thus remains on legislation and a vocal sub-section of societal attitudes rather than the realities and experiences of those who have faced such a crisis and reassembled their identity and life in the face of it.

The news and current affairs footage analysed in the research presented in this chapter suggests that the important perspectives come from politicians and from activists from pro-life and pro-choice groups. Had

Sarah Ewart and Amanda Mellet chosen not to take legal action over the fact that they had to travel to the mainland United Kingdom in order to obtain an abortion to terminate a much-desired pregnancy, which became a crisis as a result of fatal foetal abnormality, it is questionable as to whether their narratives would have received any prominence on Irish television. Narratives of those women whose pregnancies did not have the emotive impact of fatal foetal abnormality are virtually non-existent, silent tragedies or moments of redemption, played out in private. While this clearly is a profoundly private issue, the inclusion of more varied personal narratives would serve by acknowledging the lived experience of thousands of Irish women, and by contributing to 'more sophisticated approaches that realistically accommodate the actual social experiences of pregnancy and mothering' (Porter & Porter 1996: 280).

Overall, the gendered ideology of Irish women has extended from the virginal mother figure to that of the dutiful daughter. This desire for young Irish women to conform to this ideal and to prevent parental disappointment is profoundly threatened in the face of an unplanned teenage pregnancy. Erdman (2014: 22) highlights how the issue of abortion poses a threat to the core moral beliefs of the nation state and where human rights come against democratic conflict, 'abortion carries a symbolic importance, bound to conflicts over the very identity of the nation-state'. The issue of crisis pregnancy is, thus, framed by non-fiction Irish television as being a societal crisis rather than a personal crisis for those affected. Teenage parents have become one part of a larger discourse of 'youth-at-risk', a generalized deficit category that warrants the monitoring and scrutiny of the decisions and behaviours of young parents in ways that do not necessarily align with their lived experiences (Kamp & Kelly 2014).

Concluding thoughts

This chapter has explored a number of issues in relation to the presence and absence of personal narratives of crisis pregnancy on non-fiction Irish television, paying particular attention to experiences of teenage pregnancy

and abortion. Such narratives are scarce on *RTÉ News* and on *Prime Time* based on footage contained in the sample period from July 2015 to June 2016. Whilst personal narratives of crisis pregnancy were at the core of *The Teens' Midwife* and *50,000 Secret Journeys*, such narratives played secondary roles against more authoritative voices such as the teenagers' designated midwife and the participants in the debate segment of *The Abortion Debate*. Reliance on the voices of others to tell teenage parents' stories discursively constructs young mothers and fathers in ways that reinforce stereotypical (mis)conceptions of teenagers as passive parents. It is our position that personal narratives deserve more prominence.

The subject of crisis pregnancy in Ireland has historically been a contentious one. Rattigan's (2008) research illustrates the extreme lengths that some Irish women would go to in the early twentieth century in order to conceal their pregnancies, including resorting to infanticide. These women feared being shunned by devout Catholic families and friends. Such stigma has, for the most part, faded in the context of twenty-first-century Ireland. However, as this chapter indicates, it remains the case that debate about crisis pregnancy on Irish television has continued to be dominated by opinions of politicians and those of various pro-life and pro-choice activists rather than by those who have personal experience. Pregnant teenagers, and others who experience crisis pregnancy, are positioned as the object of the debate, rather than central protagonists in the debate.

The stigma associated with teenage pregnancy and with parenting outside of marriage in Ireland is connected to the moral narratives of Catholicism and its central place in the formation of the Irish state. Whilst participants in *The Teens' Midwife* had the love and support of their parents and extended family members, an element of disappointment and regret still lingered around the upcoming transition of the young women into young mothers. Whilst Irish women had to aspire to embodying a virginal mother persona in order to avoid being hated by those in power (Meaney 1991), this ideal can also be seen to be extended to the Irish daughter. All three participants in *The Teens' Midwife* faced disappointment from their parents when they initially informed them of their pregnancies. Some of this disappointment would, undoubtedly, be for concern of the more complex pathways their daughters would walk in finding their own space

in the social and economic spaces that young people occupy in the twenty-first century. Yet some is also potentially connected to a residual discourse of Catholic morality, regardless of how close the family is to the faith. As the participants passed an array of religious iconography on their frequent visits to the teenage pregnancy unit at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, one couldn't but be alerted to the lasting presence of such morality.

Meanwhile, the women in *50,000 Secret Journeys* spoke of the secrecy and isolation they went through when choosing to have an abortion. None of the three participants in *50,000 Secret Journeys* mentioned the role, if any, that their parents played in their decision to have an abortion. This might suggest that the women interviewed in *50,000 Secret Journeys* did not include their parents in the decision-making process when they confronted a crisis pregnancy. In their study of abortion narratives in the United States, Kimport, Foster and Weitz found that most of their interviewees didn't tell their friends or families about the pregnancy or its termination (Kimport, Foster & Weitz 2011). In this, the fact that the abortion narratives of three Irish women were shared in such a public manner on Irish television would have to be noted as a key turning point in abortion discourse in Ireland. The open and honest natures of the interviews in *50,000 Secret Journeys* about personal experiences of abortion enabled a 'cultural conversation' where the media also served as an 'ongoing participant' (Press & Cole 1999: 3). However, the fact that *50,000 Secret Journeys* did not air as a stand-alone documentary as was originally planned created a distance between the personal narratives of the women involved and the opinions of the receiving public, a distance that was filled by a studio debate by activists and politicians.

The positioning of teenage pregnancy as a societal as opposed to personal crisis was emphasized in public consciousness by the stories of Ann Lovett and Joanne Hayes. Maguire argues that Irish women empathized with the personal narrative of Joanne Hayes given the realization that prevailing attitudes toward motherhood, sexuality and reproduction in Ireland were shaping the experiences of all Irish women (Maguire 2001). The personal life and relationships of Joanne Hayes were brandished across the national headlines in a manner that resulted from circumstances that were beyond her control and against her will. While not a teenager herself,

the profoundly public nature of her personal crisis was the result of her being connected to another baby, another unnamed, unspoken pregnancy that possibly began, and certainly ended, in crisis. The narrative highlighted the urgency and distress of women in ways that spoke powerfully to the Irish people.

What would be the outcomes if diverse personal narratives featuring contrasting situations and contrasting outcomes of teenage pregnancy were a feature of debates about teenage pregnancy and parenting? By incorporating personal narratives in a more prominent manner, audiences from more diverse backgrounds are included in constructing the dialogue and the possibilities for action in ensuring the best possible outcome, whichever outcome is chosen. In terms of the debate around the ambiguities inherent in Ireland's abortion laws, more voices from the middle ground are required. By reducing the number of contributions from politicians and activists who are totally pro-life or totally pro-choice and by increasing the number of contributions informed by the lived experience of 'unspectacular' teenage pregnancy, along with those of people who have mixed views on the issue of abortion, Irish audiences will become exposed to the personal, emotional and social complexities of the issues.

Primary status is given to 'expert' opinions of medical and legal professionals, politicians and activists from various pro-life and pro-choice organizations in discussions of teenage pregnancy and parenting in Ireland. The narratives that existed in *The Teens' Midwife* and *50,000 Secret Journeys* illustrate a subtle social stigma that still exists towards teenage mothers as well as those women who have had abortions; either way, a preferred status of 'ideal daughter' appears to be inherently compromised. However, this study only touched the surface of representations of personal narratives on non-fiction Irish television. Further research on this issue, particularly on specific aspects of crisis pregnancies such as news coverage from media beyond RTÉ of issues regarding the upcoming Citizens' Assembly on the Eighth Amendment would be extremely beneficial in uncovering attitudes and habits of the Irish media when reporting on one of the most dividing issues in Irish society and politics.

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