

Unmarried Mothers: A Comparative Study

DEIRDRE KIRKE*

University College, Dublin

Précis: This study was designed to identify factors which might be associated with unmarried motherhood in Ireland. One hundred unmarried mothers and a control group of the same number of married mothers were interviewed by the author in the National Maternity Hospital, Dublin in 1973. The results of the study showed that there was no difference between the two groups in their family background or lifestyle but significant differences emerged in three areas (i.e., parental control of dating, attitudes towards premarital sexual intercourse and religious practice).

I INTRODUCTION

Unmarried mothers are of concern to people in very many societies — partly because their behaviour threatens the almost universal norm of bearing children only within a marital relationship and also because they pose a complex problem for the medical and social services. Despite this concern and the fact that many agencies, both social and medical, cater for their needs, little of what is known about unmarried mothers in Ireland is based on scientific research. The author designed this research project to identify factors which might be associated with unmarried motherhood in Ireland.

II METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in the National Maternity Hospital, Dublin in 1973. During the previous year 7,134 mothers were delivered in this hospital

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and five per cent of these were unmarried.¹ A consecutive series of 100 unmarried mothers (i.e., every unmarried mother who had her baby in the hospital during a twelve-week period) was contacted. There were three refusals and one unusable questionnaire. The response rate was, therefore, 96 per cent. In order to place the information collected from these mothers in a proper context, a control group of 100 married mothers was chosen. There were four refusals from this group, so the response rate was again 96 per cent. To ensure that none of the married mothers in the study had been pregnant before marriage, only those whose marriage date preceded the delivery date by nine calendar months were included and if, as happened in three cases, it was discovered during the course of the interview that the mother had been pregnant with this or a previous baby before she was married, she was excluded from the study. The married mothers were matched with the unmarried mothers for first or second birth, for social class, using the occupation of their father as an index of their social class (a)*, and for place of upbringing, whether urban or rural (b). Eighty-one unmarried mothers had given birth to their first, and 15 to their second, baby. The same number of married mothers were selected in each birth category.

Thirty-two unmarried mothers had been reared in an urban setting, 15 of whom came from non-manual social classes and 17 from manual social classes. Sixty-four unmarried mothers had been reared in a rural setting, 27 of whom came from non-manual and 37 from manual social classes. Married mothers were matched exactly with the unmarried mothers on social class and place of upbringing, so the same number of married mothers fell into each of the categories given above.

An attempt was made to match for age and, although sufficient married mothers could not be obtained in the under-20 age group, age differences were kept to a minimum by ensuring that the same number of mothers were included in the age range up to 24 years and in the 25 years and older age range. Seventy-two unmarried and the same number of married mothers were aged 24 years or less; of these, 29 unmarried mothers and eight married mothers were under 20 years of age. Twenty-four unmarried and 24 married mothers were aged 25 years or older. Twenty-one unmarried and all 24 married mothers were aged between 25 and 29 years. The remaining three unmarried mothers were aged 30 years or more.²

1. It was not considered necessary for this study to have a representative sample of all Irish unmarried mothers. Indeed, there are major ethical and practical problems involved in obtaining such a sample. Of the 100 unmarried mothers studied here, 20 came to the National Maternity Hospital from a Mother and Baby home and 80 were referred to the hospital in the usual way by a general practitioner or a consultant obstetrician. The findings apply only to the mothers studied in the National Maternity Hospital and cannot be assumed to be representative of unmarried mothers in Ireland.

* Definitions of letters in parentheses throughout the text are given in the Appendix.

2. Due to the age differences which existed, age was controlled for on all the major variables.

The 192 mothers were interviewed by the author in the hospital on the 3rd or 4th day following delivery of their baby. All interviews were completed between February and June, 1973.

III PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

A detailed analysis was made of the family background, life style, attitudes and patterns of behaviour of the unmarried mothers in an attempt to identify factors which might be associated with unmarried motherhood. Throughout this study, comparisons are made between the unmarried and married mothers and the specific differences are indicated in the text.³

In the considerable international literature available on the topic of unmarried motherhood and on related topics such as premarital sexual behaviour, there are few studies which are strictly comparable with the present one. Those consulted were carried out in the United States and Britain, so cultural differences must be allowed for when making comparisons. These surveys varied considerably in sampling size and sampling procedure. Few of the studies used a control group and none used a control group of married mothers who had not become pregnant before marriage. However, many of the studies pursued one or more themes which are relevant to the present study and reference will be made to these.

The presentation of the results is divided into five sections; two sections on family background and life style are followed by three sections which describe what emerged as the most significant differences between the unmarried and married mothers in this study (i.e., parental control of dating, attitudes towards premarital sexual intercourse and religious practice).

Having controlled for social class, it was not surprising that few striking differences were found between the unmarried and married mothers in their family background or life style. Information on these areas of their lives is, however, of interest in itself and, as it provides a context for discussion of differences, it is given first below.

Family Background

BROKEN HOMES^(c)

Although two-thirds of the unmarried mothers came from homes where both parents were alive and living together, a considerable percentage, 33.3 per cent of the unmarried and 24.0 per cent of the married mothers, came from broken homes (NSS). This result for the unmarried mothers is similar

3. The X^2 test with Yates's correction has been used in this study to test differences between the unmarried and married mothers on various variables. Where the difference was found to be significant, the value of P is given. Only levels of or below $P = .05$ were considered significant. Where a difference has been subjected to a statistical test and has been found not significant, this is indicated by (NSS).

to Weir's 35 per cent (1970, p. 78) and lower than the 40 per cent reported by Young (1966, p. 89) and Thompson (1956, p. 78). The finding of the present study that there was no significant difference in the numbers coming from broken homes when a comparative group was used confirms the findings of Vincent (1961, p. 101) and Schofield (1968, p. 116), both of whom also used comparative groups.

UNHAPPY HOMES^(d)

The unmarried and married mothers were asked a number of questions about the relationships which existed between their parents and between their parents and themselves in order to determine the extent to which their homes were happy or unhappy. The overall pattern which emerged was that almost all the mothers came from happy homes. Only eight unmarried mothers came from homes where both conditions for an unhappy home were fulfilled. No married mother came from an unhappy home. In some homes one of the conditions was fulfilled. Twelve unmarried and four married mothers reported strained relationships between themselves and their parents. Although a large percentage of unmarried and married mothers, 65.2 per cent and 76 per cent, respectively, described the relationship between their parents as good or very good (NSS), a difference did exist in the number who reported poor relations between their parents. A total of 20.2 per cent of the unmarried and 3.1 per cent of the married mothers described the relationship between their parents as poor ($P < .001$). Schofield (1968, p. 120) also found an association between poor family relationships and premarital sexual behaviour^(e). The percentage of unmarried mothers in this study who came from unhappy homes was similar to that reported by Thompson (1956, pp. 78-79), but lower than the percentages, ranging from 40 per cent to 70 per cent, found by Weir (1970, p. 40), Claman *et al.* (1969, p. 329), Young (1966, p. 92) and Franklin (1966, p. 791).

FAMILY SIZE AND SIBLING POSITION

In an American study Reiss (1967, p. 150) found a relationship between family size and the sexual permissiveness of the children. He found that the only child was the most permissive, a person who was one of four or more children rated next highest in permissiveness, and permissiveness was slightly lower for the two-or-three-child family member.

These findings were not confirmed in the present study since only six unmarried mothers were only children and, although 75 were one of four or more children, a similar proportion of married mothers came from families of the same size. No difference was found between the unmarried and married mothers in their position by birth in their family of origin. Schofield (1968, pp. 118-119) also found that no relationship existed between position by birth in the family and sexual experience.

SEX EDUCATION BY PARENTS

Similar numbers of unmarried and married mothers, 36 and 37, respectively, received some sex education from their parents. Of those given such information by their parents, more of the married than the unmarried — 62.2 per cent of the 37 married and 36.1 per cent of the 36 unmarried — received detailed sex education ^(f) ($P < .05$). The other 23 unmarried and 14 married mothers were told by their parents about only one of the items listed under detailed sex education. Although sex education did not seem to prevent or encourage premarital intercourse in either the boys or the girls in Schofield's study (1968, p. 84), the 29 per cent of girls who received no sex education from their parents was much lower than the 60 per cent who received no sex education from their parents in the present study.

Life Style

An examination of various aspects of the unmarried mothers' life style seemed necessary in order to understand them. Having controlled for social class, no major differences were expected between the unmarried and married mothers in the information collected on education or work patterns. In the event, both groups were similar on all aspects examined.

EDUCATION

There were no differences between the unmarried and married mothers in levels of education attained, the percentage leaving school at various ages, or the proportions who liked school. Different findings were reported by Weir (1970, p. 38) whose respondents left school at an earlier age than in the present study and by Schofield (1968, p. 127) who noted that more of the experienced^(g) than non-experienced^(h) girls disliked school and that they left earlier than the non-experienced girls.

WORK

Similarly high proportions of unmarried and married mothers, 60 per cent approximately, had been working in non-manual jobs; almost all of the mothers in both groups liked their jobs and their level of earnings and patterns of spending were the same. These data differ from those of Thompson (1956, p. 77) and Weir (1970, p. 30), both of whom found a larger percentage in manual occupations than in the present study, and from Schofield's findings (1968, p. 129) that the experienced girls in his study were more often discontented in their jobs than were the non-experienced.

Friendship Patterns and Leisure Activities

Information collected on the number of mothers who had friends, the sex of the friends, the number of evenings spent with friends and at home, and the leisure-time activities engaged in with friends yielded no significant differences between the unmarried and married mothers in this study.

DATING

There was no difference between the unmarried and married mothers in the number who had done lines⁽ⁱ⁾ or in the number of lines they had done; nor was there a difference in the number who had dated^(j) boys for periods of less than three months or in the number of boys they had dated for periods of less than three months.

RELATIONSHIPS OF UNMARRIED MOTHERS WITH PUTATIVE FATHERS

A discussion of the unmarried mothers' relationships with the putative fathers is clearly of interest. In general, the putative fathers were not casual acquaintances; a considerable proportion of the unmarried mothers had an enduring sexual and emotional relationship with the putative father. A total of 80.2 per cent of the unmarried mothers had been doing a line with the putative father before the pregnancy started; 63.1 per cent said they had dated the putative father for at least three months before making love for the first time and 49.5 per cent said they had intercourse regularly from then on. When asked to describe the relationship they had with the putative father at the time the pregnancy started, 43.2 per cent said it was a love relationship, 25.2 per cent a close relationship, and 31.6 per cent a casual relationship. These findings are consistent with those of several studies (Wimperis, 1960, p. 56; Reiss, 1967, p. 84; and Weir, 1970, p. 47), but they do not support Young's (1954, p. 134) observation that all relationships between the unmarried mothers and the putative fathers in her study were casual.

The results described so far have shown great similarities between the unmarried and married mothers in this study. There were, however, some striking differences between them. These are examined below. They related to parental control of dating, attitudes towards premarital sexual intercourse and religious practice.

Parental Control of Dating

When girls are developing their values and standards towards premarital sexual behaviour, parental interest seems to be important. There were two highly significant differences between the unmarried and married mothers in this study in relation to parental approval of dating and having a parental directive regarding the time they had to return home from a date as girls. The percentage of the married mothers who had their parents' approval when dating was much higher (92.7 per cent) than for the unmarried mothers (71.9 per cent) ($P < .0005$). More of the parents of the married than unmarried mothers — 81.3 per cent and 57.3 per cent, respectively — stated a specific time by which their daughter must be home at night ($P < .001$). The parents of both groups of girls who stated a time were serious about

the matter. This is shown by the fact that approximately 80 per cent of the parents of the unmarried and married mothers who stated a time imposed some sanction on their daughter if the time was not adhered to. These findings are consistent with those of Schofield (1968, p. 121) who reported that parental discipline in relation to dating was less strict for the experienced than the non-experienced teenage girls in his study. The age at which daughters were allowed to date on their own did not emerge as important in the present study, nor were the actual time by which they had to be home at night or was the type of sanction imposed for not being on time important.

Attitudes Towards Premarital Sexual Intercourse

While it is clear from the data that parents influence their daughters' sexual behaviour and attitudes to some extent, the girl's own attitudes appeared to be even a better predictor of her behaviour. Personal approval of premarital sexual intercourse has been positively associated with having had premarital sexual intercourse (Christensen and Gregg, 1972, p. 57 and Teevan, 1972, p. 286). In the present study the level of consistency between attitudes towards premarital sexual intercourse and having a premarital pregnancy was moderate ($\text{Gamma} = 0.5$).⁴ A total of 63.5 per cent of the unmarried mothers approved of premarital sexual intercourse regardless of the amount of affection present in the relationship, while only 13.5 per cent of the married mothers, none of whom had experienced a premarital pregnancy, approved of such behaviour ($P < .0005$). A considerable proportion of the unmarried mothers changed their attitudes towards premarital intercourse during the pregnancy, so that although 63.5 per cent approved at the time the pregnancy started, the percentage had dropped to 32.3 per cent approving at the time of interview. The percentage of married mothers who approved changed only from 13.5 per cent to 11.5 per cent. The difference between the percentages of mothers who approved at the time of interview was still significant ($P < .001$).

Religious Practice

Infrequent church attendance has been found to be associated with permissive sexual behaviour (Schofield, 1968, p. 124; Reiss, 1967, pp. 43-44; and Kanin and Howard, 1972, p. 208). These studies took regular church attendance or attendance at church at least once a month as an indicator of religious practice. A negative relationship was found in the present study, too, between attendance at Mass at least once a month and permissive attitudes and behaviour. More married than unmarried mothers —

4. A moderate consistency of this level is a relatively strong association. Schuman and Johnson (1976, p. 168), reviewing the literature of the last half century of research on attitudes and behaviour in general, concluded that in most cases the relationship ranged from small to moderate.

89.6 per cent and 77.1 per cent, respectively — attended Mass at least once a month ($P < .05$). In the Irish context, it seemed more appropriate to take together the three practices of attending Mass, receiving the Sacraments and saying prayers as indices of religious practice. When focusing on all three indices together, the difference between the two groups of mothers was much greater than when focusing only on attendance at Mass. More married than unmarried mothers — 78.1 per cent and 40.6 per cent, respectively — participated in all three practices ($P < .0005$). When age was controlled for, the difference was not significant in the under 20 year olds, but remained highly significant in the 20–24 year olds ($P < .0005$) and in those aged 25 years or older ($P < .005$).

IV CONCLUSIONS

Having examined the family background, life style, attitudes and patterns of behaviour of 96 unmarried mothers and having compared the findings with those for a control group of 96 married mothers, great similarities, some small differences and a few major differences were found between the two groups of mothers.

The mothers were matched for social class, place of upbringing and, as far as possible, for age. Similar proportions of the unmarried and married mothers came from broken homes, but by far the greater proportion in each group of mothers came from homes where both parents were alive and living together. Happiness in the parental home was measured by a number of indices. On one of these, the relationship between parents, more unmarried than married mothers reported a poor relationship. On all other indices of happiness the unmarried and married mothers were similar with almost all of them coming from happy homes.

The size of their family of origin and the position the mothers held in her family of origin were similar for both groups. The same proportion in each group of mothers received no sex education from their parents, but of those who did, more of the married than unmarried mothers received detailed information.

The life style of the unmarried mothers and the married mothers while they were single showed great similarities. Detailed examination of their education, work, friendship patterns, leisure and dating activities revealed no significant differences between the unmarried and married mothers.

The relationships the unmarried mothers had with the putative fathers were usually of considerable duration, most of the mothers saying they had been dating the putative father for at least three months at the time the pregnancy started.

Although some significant differences were reported in the areas just discussed, the most significant findings of this study were in the following three areas. The unmarried mothers' parents showed less interest in their daughters' dating than did the married mothers' parents; the attitudes of the unmarried mothers were much more permissive towards premarital sexual intercourse than were those of the married mothers; and the unmarried mothers did not practice their religion with the same intensity as did the married mothers. The findings indicate, therefore, that the unmarried mothers studied differed in some important areas of their upbringing, attitudes and behaviour from the married mothers who had not become pregnant before marriage.

APPENDIX

Definitions

- (a) Social Class: The Hall-Jones scale of occupational prestige for males was used to allocate the mothers to social classes, using their father's occupation as an index of their social class.
- (b) Place of Upbringing: If the mother was reared in Dublin, Galway, Cork, Limerick, Belfast or their suburbs, she was considered to have had an urban upbringing. Reared outside of the major cities, her upbringing was considered to have been rural.
- (c) Broken Homes: Mothers were considered to come from broken homes "if for reason of illegitimacy, or of parental death, separation, divorce or desertion they were brought up apart from one or both of their parents" (Illsley and Thompson, 1961, p. 30). In the present study 25 unmarried mothers had lost one or both parents by death and seven were illegitimate; all 23 married mothers, whose homes were broken, had lost one or both parents by death.
- (d) Unhappy Homes: Mothers were considered to come from unhappy homes if there was conflict and disagreement (i) between the parents and (ii) between the parents and children.
- (e) Premarital Sexual Behaviour: Although this term suggests an orientation to marriage, it is used in studies of sexual behaviour to denote behaviour between single people or

between a single and a married person, who may or may not have an intention of marrying each other. When the sexual behaviour is between a single and a married person, it is premarital for the single and extramarital for the married person.

- (f) Detailed Sex Education: This included being told about periods, how to behave with boys, the sexual relationship between a man and a woman and an explanation of how babies are born.
- (g) Experienced: Those who had sexual intercourse with one or more partners.
- (h) Non-experienced: Those who had not had sexual intercourse nor indulged in the sort of sexual behaviour which may lead to intercourse.
- (i) Line: A line was taken to mean dating a boy for three months or more.
- (j) Dated: Dating a boy on her own rather than in a group of friends.

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