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SHORT REPORT: CULTURAL, HISTORICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON BABIES IN IRELAND

The World Congress in Infant Mental Health hosted by WAIMH: World Association of Infant Mental Health (WAIMH) takes place in Dublin this July. The event will be attended by representatives of the Psychological Society of Ireland and members of the Special Interest Groups in Perinatal and Infant Mental Health (SIGPIMH). With excitement building for the event, members of SIGPIMH have been reflecting on different perspectives of babies and pregnancy in Ireland and share this short report on this interesting topic!

*I tiptoe in.
I lift you up
Wriggling
In your rosy, zipped sleeper.
Yes this is the hour
For the early bird and me
When finder is keeper.*

Eavan Boland Night Feed

The poem *Night Feed* is fondly described by many as a favourite and one that perfectly paints a picture in our minds of a moment in the middle of a night feed between parent and infant. Ahead of the World Congress in Infant Mental Health, taking place in the land of a thousand welcomes, we thought about how babies are welcomed into society in Ireland.

According to the latest figures from the Central Statistics Office (CSO), there were just over 14,000 births in the third quarter of 2022 compared to over 16,500 in the previous year CSO, 2022, which highlights a general trend in decreasing birth rates in Ireland since the 1980s. In Ireland, women are entitled to 26 weeks of maternity leave plus 16 weeks of additional unpaid leave from work to support the developing relationship between infant and parent in that early attachment window, with parental leave options after birth or adoption placements. Irish babies are typically born in hospitals and, similar to other Western cultures, rates of medical intervention in birth are high, (Higgins et al., 2018). Over a third of first-time mothers in Ireland give birth by caesarean section, with a five-fold increase since the 1980s. Similarly, Ireland had the highest rate of medically induced labours in a study of 13 high income countries, with a reported rate of 35.9% compared to Sweden's 13.9% (Seijmonsbergen-

Schermers et al., 2020). In Ireland, a public health nurse (PHN) visits families at home during the first three days following the birth of a baby and at intervals in the first three and a half years of a child's life. PHNs are uniquely placed to offer advice and support around feeding, safe sleep, child safety, community supports and the parent-infant relationship. PHNs also identify and provide advice and signposting to parents experiencing postnatal anxiety or depression.

Cultural practices following the birth of a baby vary. In Ireland, many mothers leave the hospital as soon as possible. Parents may host visitors at home soon after this, as family and friends convene to meet the new arrival. By contrast, in China there is a custom of "zuo yue zi", where women traditionally observe periods of mandated rest for one month after birth and are cared for by female members of both sides of their family (Cheung, 1997). This ritual may result in mothers having more time to focus on bonding with their babies and establishing breastfeeding in the first weeks of life.

Irish families adopt various traditions before and after their baby's arrival. In the past when infant mortality rates were higher in Ireland, expecting parents were more superstitious, often not buying a pram until the baby was born. This contrasts with the more recent growth of baby showers, which originated in the US as an opportunity to "shower" parents with gifts to ensure that they were prepared for their new arrival! Oftentimes, baby showers are associated with first babies in the family, the idea being that subsequent children will then receive the "hand-me-downs". Irish families also celebrate babies after the birth, with ceremonies including a christening or a baby naming ceremony.

Historical customs and superstitions in Ireland include pregnant women not entering a graveyard and being advised to avoid crossing the path of a rabbit as it would lead to your baby having a cleft lip – though, if this did happen, you were to tear the hem of your dress to prevent it. Mary, a long-time resident of the Aran islands shared some historical traditions, including stitching a picture of Mary holding baby Jesus in her arms onto the pram in pink or blue thread to protect the baby. This and similar traditions have since died out but are a poignant reminder of a community of people coming together to help new parents in meaningful ways.

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Women in their 80s may remember a different Irish custom described as "Churching", where a couple would go to mass following the birth of their infant, to have a blessing and for the woman to be "cleansed" of her sins. It's a practice that reflects a time pre-Vatican II in Ireland.

There are several cultural concepts that represent how babies and parenting have been or are viewed in Ireland. The notion of the devoted "Irish Mammy" is upheld as a time-honoured institution and, like many societies, Ireland has strong matriarchal roots. Societal shifts have changed the focus of her attention, but never diminish or deviate the love of the Irish mammy. Although historically a stay-at-home figure, women are now a strong part of the workforce, with more flexible working arrangements, parental leave to help facilitate working mothers.

In Irish mythology, changelings are believed to be fairies who are left in place of human babies that have been stolen away. Changelings were thought have a different temperament and behaviour to the child they replaced and were thought of as being more fussy, demanding, and difficult to care for. It was believed that fairies would swap infants for changelings because of jealousy, to exact revenge for perceived wrongs, or to strengthen their own population. To protect babies, parents would engage in superstitious behaviours and rituals, such as placing iron objects on or near the baby, for instance in their crib. Beliefs and superstitions about changelings were prevalent in Irish mythology and folklore for centuries.

Babies have also been represented in art, which is often considered a reflection of, and a response to the culture and society in which it is created, a way of preserving, and making sense of our past, as well as imagining a different future. Given the importance of religion to early Irish identity, it is not surprising that the earliest surviving portrait in a western manuscript of a mother and baby is the "Madonna and Child", found in the Book of Kells dating from around 800AD. This is the only representation of a female in the entire illuminated masterpiece. However, unlike other images of the virgin mother from that time, this mother is depicted as regal, her son lying across her body, reaching up toward her, with her bare breasts exposed – a powerful figure of femininity, nurturing her infant. This portrayal is rarely seen in early Christian art, but it is believed to be influenced by the Celtic society which viewed women as equals, and honoured their sexuality, autonomy, and strength.

In contrast, hidden among the carvings on some medieval churches and buildings (including The Rock of Cashel) there are figurative carvings of a woman displaying an exaggerated vulva known as Sheela-na-Gig. Their exact origin is unknown, but several theories have been postulated. The carvings have been described as grotesques that keep away evil, as a warning against lust, or as a throwback to a pre-Christian goddess who was a symbol of fertility. Interestingly these symbols appear also in the UK and Europe but are most numerous in Ireland with over 100 having been counted. Sheela-na-Gig has captured the imagination of poets, artists, and singers such as Seamus Heaney and PJ Harvey.

Interestingly, there is a new imagining of Sheela-na-Gig on the site of the Sean McDermott Street Magdalene Laundry (@projectsheela). The Magdalene institution was designed so that the girls and women confined there could do penance to atone for sexual sins that they had been adjudged to have committed or to be in danger of committing. Here these women were locked away and forced to engage in hard labour while being psychologically abused. Along with the traditions, rituals and customs associated with Irish babies, it is important to acknowledge

the weight of our history. In particular, the stories of these women and babies who went through the laundries and mother baby homes who deserve to be remembered. Even though Ireland was not unique in having mother baby homes, we likely had the highest proportion in the world. These women were forced to leave their homes, work long hours and be separated from their children and families. The mortality rate for infants born in these homes was estimated at 15%, significantly higher than within the general population Irish Government, 2021. It was not until 2013 that the Irish State issued a state apology for the human rights violations endured by the women and children incarcerated in the laundries, though efforts continue to ensure the re-telling of the stories of these women and children for future generations.

The World Association for Infant Mental Health (<https://waimh.org/>) is an international organisation which aims to "to promote the mental wellbeing and healthy development of infants throughout the world, taking into account cultural, regional, and environmental variations". Their objectives include improving our understanding of the impact of a baby's early years and supporting positive parenting and caregiving contexts through research and education. No doubt the congress, which is being hosted by the Irish Association of Infant Mental Health (IAIMH) in Dublin, will allow for the discussion of unique and shared perspectives on infant development, including those shared above, and we hope to see colleagues from PSI at the event in July!

Anne-Marie Casey, Jillian Doyle, Eithne NiLonphuirt, Karen Matvienko-Sikar, Katie McDonnell, Claire Crowe, Caragh Hesse Tyson, Aine Herlihy, Annette Llyod, Rebecca Ryan, Sabrina Coyle, Aoife Menton, Molly O'Connor, and Jessica Dailey.
SIGPIMH Committee 2023

Connect with SIGPIMH through, Twitter: @Perinata_SIG, Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/perinata_sig/, LinkedIn: PSI Perinatal and Infant Mental Health Special Interest Group (SIGPIMH), F: www.facebook.com/PSISIGPIMH, E: perinatalandinfant@psychologicalsociety.ie

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