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Thomas E. Jordan

Quality of Life
and Mortality
Among Children
Historical Perspectives



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Quality of Life and Mortality Among Children

Historical Perspectives

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Preface

The purpose of this study is to investigate the personal and numerical aspects of death among children across three centuries. *Quality of Life* is the construct used to explore the complex. For nineteenth century England and Wales, and Ireland, it is formulated as two national measures, the VICQUAL and QUALEIRE indexes. Each index consists of several domains containing relevant numerical data. For the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries written sources—diaries, essays, inscriptions, poems, and church records, for example, are employed. In addition to limited numerical materials from that era, attention is drawn to the reaction of parents to the death of a child, and to the variety of ways in which the loss was reacted to, and memorialized.

Contents

1 Mortality	1
1.1 Death	2
References	4
2 Quality of Life	5
2.1 Introduction.	5
References	8
3 Death of Children in the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries.	11
3.1 Introduction.	11
3.2 Sources	12
3.3 Death	12
3.4 Health and Development.	17
3.5 Therapy	19
3.6 Mortality in Seventeenth Century Dublin	20
3.7 Seventeenth Century London.	20
3.8 Eighteenth Century Ireland and England.	22
3.8.1 England	22
3.8.2 Ireland	23
3.8.3 Famine	27
3.9 Cultural Factors	28
3.9.1 Ireland	28
3.9.2 England and Wales	29
3.9.3 Godfrey's Cordial	30
3.9.4 Baby Farming	30
3.9.5 Climbing Boys	30
3.9.6 Industrialization.	31
3.10 Date and Perspective	32
References	34

4	Children’s Mortality in England and Wales: 1838–1902	39
4.1	Introduction.	39
4.2	Health and Living Conditions	41
4.3	Quality of Life	45
4.4	Discussion.	52
4.4.1	Family	54
	References	55
5	Birth, Life, and Death in Dublin, 1619–1798	59
	References	71
6	Nineteenth Century Ireland	73
6.1	Post-Famine Mortality	79
6.2	A Descriptive Estimate	80
6.3	Correlations.	84
	References	86
7	Mortality Among Children	87

Introduction

Among people engaged in the pursuit of children's welfare emphasis is placed on the opportunities childhood presents through its plasticity for character formation and acquisition of skills. To be sure, infancy is seen as a delicate transition from the security of the uterus to the independence with vulnerability of the early stages; but for those weeks there is recourse to modern medicine in most cases, and optimism is the value which prevails. The early years are construed as an opportunity to counter the effects of unhealthy environments in a community or family. Such benign outcomes are endorsed by religious and secular people around the world. Within this consensus there is room for local and sectarian values as people transmit selected elements of the local culture.

Largely absent from this scenario in the modern world is the death of children; medicine, science, and philanthropy, plus governments and public policy, address opportunities for bettering the lives of children, especially the youngest. In recent decades poliomyelitis was banished from the Western scene and, worldwide, smallpox is no longer the rite of childhood whose survivors bore the marks of its violence. The death of many children tends to be an event reported from places around the world which are far away, although tragedies can appear closer to home from time to time.

Nineteenth century data from England and Ireland demonstrate that the concept, quality of life, provides a useful approach for understanding mortality among children in the Victorian era. England and Wales had centers of industrialization with a sorry list of disamenities (Williamson 1982). Ireland was still largely agricultural, although Belfast and the Lagan valley increasingly resembled towns across the Irish Sea, in England and Scotland.

A substantial difference was the earlier aggregation of social data in England and Wales, while Ireland did not begin to gather vital statistics until 1863–1864. The censuses of Ireland conformed to the pattern in England and Wales, a step which facilitates comparisons in some areas. However, mortality data from Victorian Ireland did not meet the quality level attained on the larger island, so that explorations and comparisons in child mortality are less satisfactory. When children die families mourn their loss privately, and public discourse does not

address the singularity of the family's trauma. However, the Sudden Death syndrome (SIDS) is now recognized in public discourse, and sends ripples beyond parents and siblings which touch relatives, friends, and the general public. In that sense, the death of a child through SIDS becomes a public event.

Mourning the deaths of children evokes awareness of their futures eclipsed by an unknowable agenda. Recently, a newspaper gave an account of a woman whose son was stillborn 20 years before. She had named the child, and periodically she initiates a make-believe conversation with him. At age twenty or so she imagines what his life might have been up to that point. A Victorian lady wrote that memory of a stillbirth had not left her long after the event, and she memorialized the child in a poem many years later.

In still earlier days, when the death of children was even more frequent, loss of one child after another led to extended periods of mourning. This may account in part for the impression of the early modern period as one of persisting depression. In eras burdened by economic and political problems stress was compounded by the experience of personal tragedy. There is the anecdote of the man who observed with bravado that he still had a Baker's dozen of surviving children, his need to compensate is evident, and suggests that grief takes many forms, at times posing the stark choice of whether to laugh or to cry—or to do both.

Modes of inquiry. The sources for consideration of mortality among children are diverse, and require a range of approaches. For today's information, and for archives as far back as the early nineteenth century, censuses at intervals of a decade are informative. For such sources research uses number as the data language or idiom of inquiry. Statistical procedures applied to numbers can identify effects and associations in data sets. Typical variables of interest whose influence is the question at hand are gender, age, and elements of peoples' social background. In this work census data also provide numerically based indexes of quality of life to explore data on mortality among children in the nineteenth century.

One measure of quality of life, is the VICQUAL index; it comprises fourteen factors in four domains. The second is the QUALEIRE index of quality of life in Ireland composed of fourteen elements in three domains. Connecting the two censuses is their similarity of format and procedure, although the two indexes are drawn from separate societies.

When research into children's mortality goes to a still earlier era the mode of inquiry becomes less number-centered. Sources are less likely to be numeric, and inquiry is more speculative. The investigator brings values to the procedures and sifts materials for relevance. Source materials include diaries, memoirs, and contemporary accounts—all of which provide content filtered through the outlook of two people, the investigator and the authors of documents.

The sources of that kind employed here include seventeenth century parish registers. They recorded christenings, marriages, and burials, and also the daily matters of paying bills to repair the church roof and to pay for candles. Occasionally we encounter a waspish note which might, on further consideration, have seemed un-charitable to the clerk who made the entry. For quality of life in

the seventeenth century we make gross discriminations about peoples' way of life and its quality, and infer that they were rich or poor. An indicant of urban social quality of life is the number of hearths or windows counted in a dwelling, and on which taxation was based. The premise is that those with considerable amenities enjoyed a superior quality of life.

Insightful in a different way are the diaries and memoirs left to us by people who usually did not intend their jottings for public display. In this category is the diary of Samuel Pepys whose daily experiences in seventeenth century London, including his moral lapses, were set down in code. Pepys's account of the Great Fire of London in 1666, has validity derived from his personal role at the time. An empirical frame of mind was evident in the seventeenth century physician who sought to study the progress of influenza and related symptoms; he made the rounds of city churches and counted the number of coughs and sneezes.

Subjectivity inherent in scrutiny of personal documents is an example of a mode of inquiry which is complementary to seemingly objective and scientific methods. Both methods are employed when sources are varied and return us to a world long vanished. Against the claim of objectivity we evaluate statistical results as estimates within a degree of error. To admittedly subjective evaluations of documentary evidence we ascribe honesty of intent modulated by the values which the diarist brought to the task. In the case of John Aubrey's *Brief Lives*, set down in the seventeenth century, the validity of his little sketches is strengthened by his personal ties and leavened by his taste for gossip.

In this study of mortality among children from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century materials are subjective and objective opening up harsh realities as we seek to understand the life cycle and its entrances and exits.

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Thomas E. Jordan