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Article

“For some people it isn’t a choice, it’s just how it happens”: Accounts of ‘delayed’ motherhood among middle-class women in the UK.

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Abstract

Over the past few decades the number of women having their first babies over the age of 35 in the United Kingdom (UK) has increased. Women’s timing of motherhood is invariably bound up with a discourse of ‘choice’ and in this paper we consider the role choice plays in the timing of motherhood among women who have been defined as ‘older’ mothers. This article is based on data from 11 semi-structured interviews that explored the transition to motherhood among ‘older’ middle-class mothers. The interviews were analysed using critical discursive psychology. The women drew upon two dominant repertoires when making sense of their timing of motherhood. Within the first repertoire, ‘older motherhood as circumstance’, older motherhood was presented as the outcome of life circumstances beyond their control, with a lack of the ‘right’ circumstances facilitating ‘delayed’ motherhood. Within the second repertoire,

‘older motherhood as readiness’, women constructed themselves as (now) prepared for motherhood. ‘Readiness’ was bound up with notions of self-fulfillment, yet also assessments of their ability to be ‘good’ mothers. We conclude that, far from a straightforward choice, the timing of motherhood is shaped by cultural definitions of the ‘right’ circumstances for parenthood, but also cultural definitions of ‘good’ motherhood, which may define when women are ‘ready’.

Keywords

Delayed motherhood, choice, timing, good mother, age

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Introduction

Since the widespread introduction and acceptance of contraception and legal abortion in the UK, and elsewhere, when and whether to have children has arguably been conceptualized as a choice, rather than destiny, for women (Sevón, 2005; Shaw & Giles, 2009). Further, increasing opportunities available to women in the latter part of the twentieth century feeds the assumption that women are able to choose from an array of different lifestyle options and to plan their life trajectories, although it should be noted that these choices are largely reflective of the opportunities afforded to middle-class women (Wilson & Huntington, 2006). In this paper we consider the role choice plays in the timing of motherhood among a particular group of women whom medical practitioners define as ‘older’ mothers. Often criticized and condemned in the media for apparently ‘choosing’ to ‘delay’ motherhood (Budds, Locke & Burr, 2013; Shaw & Giles, 2009), we explore decision-making around the timing of motherhood for these first-time mothers and question the extent to which it can be conceptualized as an uncomplicated ‘choice’.

Older motherhood

Older mothers are generally defined as women who have their first babies at age 35 or beyond (Mills & Lavender, 2014). Over the past few decades the number of older mothers in the UK has markedly increased, with the average age of mothers in 2013 recorded at 30.0, and at 28.3 for first time mothers (Office for National Statistics, 2014). Similar observations have been made in other industrialized nations (see Beets, Schippers and te Velde (2011) for an overview), prompting discussions about a trend towards delayed maternity.

Definitions of ‘older mothers’ are largely derived from risk categorization processes, which define this group of women as at (greater) risk of pregnancy-related

complications, meaning maternal age over 35 is generally considered to be a high risk factor in pregnancy among health professionals¹ (Cooke, Mills & Lavender, 2010). There are concerns that age-related fertility problems increase after the age of 35 (Bewley, Davies & Braude, 2005), whilst further medical evidence suggests older motherhood is associated with a variety of adverse outcomes for mothers and their babies (see Nwandison and Bewley (2006) for a review). These findings have sparked concerns from health professionals about the increasing number of women delaying motherhood (Bewley et al., 2005).

The reason for the trend towards delayed motherhood in the UK and other industrialized countries is difficult to determine. However, a combination of interrelated factors are likely to be influential, such as access to contraception, increased duration in full-time education and women's participation in the labour market (Berryman, Thorpe, & Windridge, 1995; Broclcháin & Beaujouan, 2012; Cooke et al., 2010; Klemetti, Kurinczuk & Redshaw, 2011; Wu & MacNeill, 2002). The trend towards later motherhood has been linked to the gains made by second-wave feminism (Stacey, 1986), as it is now increasingly acceptable that women pursue an education, career, or other personal goals prior to, or instead of, motherhood. In fact, delayed maternity has been described as a predominantly white, middle-class norm, which is held up as the ideal route to motherhood, rendering those who do not follow this trajectory deviant (Wilson & Huntington, 2006).

Theoretical explanations of the trend towards delayed motherhood vary between those that focus on the influence of social structural processes (e.g. economic (in)stability, changes in the nature of intimate relationships, and the persistence of gender inequality in relation to family life) and those that consider women's choice and agency in relation to decision-making around childbearing (see Simpson (2009) for an overview).

Anxiety about delayed motherhood often stems from the latter, with reproductive health experts in the UK cautioning women who want to ‘have it all’ that “deferring [motherhood] defies nature and risks heartbreak” (Bewley et al., 2005, p. 589). It seems that in delaying motherhood there are concerns that women are making the ‘wrong’ reproductive choices (Smajdor, 2009).

Choice and motherhood

Kuperberg and Stone (2008, p. 500) note that, in general, the media depiction of women is “increasingly pervaded by an individualistic rhetoric of choice”. Notions of choice and autonomy are at the heart of both postfeminist and neoliberal discourses (Gill, 2007) where it is, in theory, more acceptable for (middle-class) women to exercise choice over their life trajectory – including when to have children. However, in the case of older mothers, discussions of choice are complex and become problematic owing to assumptions about the reasons behind women’s choices and concerns about the risky consequences of their choices. As part of the present study, which consisted of a discourse analysis of representations of ‘older motherhood’ in the media as well as the interviews with first-time older mothers reported on here, it was found that UK newspapers largely constructed the choice to delay motherhood as selfish (Budds et al., 2013). The inference was that in ‘choosing’ to put careers or other ‘self interested’ pursuits before motherhood, older mothers are effectively ‘choosing’ to put themselves and their babies ‘at risk’, thus rendering these choices morally questionable and therefore accountable.

Furthermore, choice, autonomy and individuality notably contrast with contemporary discourses of ‘good’ motherhood, which emphasise the capacity for mothers to be child-centred and to be selfless, sacrificing their individual needs and desires for those

of their children (Brown, Small & Lumley, 1997; Hays, 1996; Lee, Bristow, Faircloth & Macvarish, 2014). Moreover, risk management and avoidance is central to the contemporary accomplishment of 'good', responsible mothering (Lee, Macvarish & Bristow, 2010). Given the many risks associated with delayed maternity, in 'choosing' to delay motherhood 'older' mothers may be said to fall even further short of the ideal.

Older motherhood – an uncomplicated choice?

Whilst a discourse of choice permeates explanations for delayed motherhood (Smajdor, 2009), it has been found that delayed motherhood is rarely a conscious, uncomplicated choice but is the outcome of a number of complex factors (Cooke, Mills & Lavender, 2012). In some early work on older motherhood, Berryman et al. (1995) noted a distinction between planned and unplanned postponement. The absence of a relationship and fertility problems were highlighted as reasons for unplanned postponement. Where delay was planned, career development and the need for financial and emotional security were important factors (Berryman et al., 1995). However, as noted by Berryman and colleagues, contemporary expectations that women undertake paid employment may influence their choices about the timing of motherhood.

Subsequent literature has highlighted similar factors which are said to contribute towards delayed maternity, such as the pursuit of education and the establishment of a career (Hammarberg & Clarke, 2005), a desire to establish financial security (Benzies et al., 2006; Cooke et al., 2012; Hammarberg & Clarke, 2005), securing a relationship (Carolan, 2003) and reaching psychological readiness to become a parent (Shelton & Johnson, 2006). Whilst this research has highlighted what women perceive as factors in delayed motherhood, in this paper we consider the cultural and material conditions

that establish the importance of these factors, thereby influencing women's reproductive choices. In particular, we argue that the timing of motherhood is shaped by both cultural definitions of the 'right' conditions for motherhood, and of what makes a 'good' mother and so, therefore, may not be considered a 'full' choice.

Whilst making life choices and actively planning one's future is arguably a prevailing feature of modern life (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991), individual choices and decisions, including the timing of motherhood, are also shaped by sociocultural norms and political processes:

women make their own reproductive choices, but they do not make them just as they please; they do not make them under conditions which they themselves create but under social conditions and constraints which they, as mere individuals, are powerless to change. (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, p.111).

The impact of social norms and political processes on the timing of motherhood become salient when we consider societal reactions to those who violate expectations by choosing to become a mother at the 'wrong' time in their lives. The reproductive decisions of teenage mothers (Hadfield, Rudoe & Sanderson-Mann, 2007), and 'older' mothers (Budds et al., 2013; Smajdor, 2009) are often scrutinized. Moreover, the timing of parenthood is policed through social norms that prescribe ideal prerequisites for parenthood and childrearing (Phoenix & Woollett, 1991) and imply that women ought to suspend childbearing until they can fulfill these requirements. Discourses of the 'right' set of circumstances for motherhood include financial security and the 'right' relationship. Perrier (2013) argues that narratives of appropriately timed motherhood reflect a middle-class trajectory of education and career followed by motherhood.

In the UK, the importance attached to whether or not people can ‘afford to have children’ is evidenced by the social stigma attached to parents living off welfare, particularly in austerity Britain (Jensen & Tyler, 2012; Tyler, 2008). Strong and stable relationships – those which can bear the burden of parenthood – are an additional requirement. Research indicates that achieving economic stability and establishing a strong relationship are influential in women’s decision-making around the timing of motherhood (Benzies et al., 2006; Olafsdottir, Wikland & Möller, 2011). Therefore, it may be argued that women’s choices are, at least to some extent, shaped by constructions of ‘appropriate’ conditions for parenting.

There is also evidence to suggest that women’s understandings of the maternal role may shape their decision-making about if and when to become a mother. ‘Good’ motherhood is conceptualised as full-time, intensive, and child-centred (Hays, 1996), and sex-role stereotype studies continue to show that perceptions of ‘good’ mothers are commensurate with full-time stay-at-home mothers, rather than those in employment (e.g. Gorman & Fritzsche, 2002). Maher and Saugeres (2007) found that women without children held an idealized view of full-time, intensive motherhood (Hays, 1996) which they saw as incompatible with employment and other aspects of their identities and life plans, indicating that discourses of ‘good’, full-time motherhood may shape women’s decisions around childbearing.

In this paper, we interrogate the ways in which older mothers in the UK account for their maternity decision-making. Taking a discursive approach, we focus on women’s accounts of the timing of motherhood and, through the identification of interpretative repertoires (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), explore how women drew upon wider discourses around the ‘right conditions’ for parenthood and ‘good motherhood’, which functioned to account for their ‘delayed’ motherhood. In doing so, we consider how

these women effectively resisted the prevailing notion that the timing of motherhood was a simple, 'selfish' choice, instead framing their timing of motherhood as desirable and as the outcome of a responsible decision. Additionally, we consider the potential impact of positioning oneself or being positioned (Davies & Harré, 1990) within these discourses on women's subjectivities and experiences as new mothers.

Method

The findings are based upon data collected through 11 semi-structured interviews with first-time 'older' mothers, carried out by the first author between Autumn 2009 and Spring 2011. The interviews focused on the transition to motherhood and any implications of their age for the women's experiences of pregnancy, maternity care and early motherhood. The study was approved by the research ethics panel at the first authors' then institution prior to commencing data collection.

The women were aged 35 or above when they had their first baby, and their babies were under two years of age at the time of the interviews. Participants were aged between 35 and 43 during their pregnancies, and so could be defined as 'older mothers'. Participants tended to hold professional occupations and as such may be defined as middle-class. All of the participants were White – nine were from the UK, one being an Australian national and one a German national. All were heterosexual. Seven were married, three were co-habiting and the remaining participant described herself as a single mother. The women were largely recruited from postnatal groups in Northern England. These groups were attended by the first author who informed the mothers about the study and left further details and contact information should the women be eligible and willing to participate. Information sheets were also distributed to groups of women via email by postnatal group leaders.

The interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim and analysed using a hybrid approach to discourse analysis, critical discursive psychology (Edley, 2001; Wetherell, 1998). This is influenced by both Foucauldian discourse analysis (e.g. Willig, 2008) and discursive psychology (e.g. Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Edwards & Potter, 1992). As such, there was a combined focus on the role of discourse whereby it is deemed both constitutive (shaping, enabling and constraining possibilities for identities, subjectivities and social action), but also constructive; it can be a tool used by participants within social interactions to achieve particular interactional effects. The analysis focused on identifying interpretative repertoires (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), which not only enable us to understand culturally available ways of discussing a particular topic (Edley, 2001), but, crucially, enable us to discuss how repertoires may be selectively employed by participants to construct accounts that achieve particular interactional ends (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). An additional focus was on the subject positions (Davies & Harré, 1990) made available within these repertoires. This hybrid approach enabled a consideration of the subject positions or possibilities for subjectivity available for participants, whilst simultaneously considering the interactional function of taking up or resisting particular positions.

Analysis

Influences upon the timing of motherhood were often diverse, with the women constructing various personal, relational and circumstantial issues as shaping their timing of motherhood, supporting the findings of Cooke et al. (2012).

In contrast to stereotypical assumptions about reasons for delayed motherhood, the timing of motherhood was not narrated as a simple, conscious and 'selfish' choice. Instead, the participants often constructed later motherhood in terms of 'circumstances'

and 'readiness', which functioned to rebut and undermine such assumptions. Primarily, participants drew upon two different interpretative repertoires: 1) Older motherhood as circumstance, and 2) Older motherhood as readiness.

Older Motherhood as Circumstance

Many of the women drew upon a repertoire of circumstance when discussing the timing of motherhood. Here, later motherhood was presented as the outcome of a set of life circumstances beyond the women's direct control, rather than a straightforward 'choice'. This repertoire was largely constructed with reference to contemporary societal notions about the 'right' situation or set of circumstances in which to have a child, the absence of which denotes an 'incorrect' or otherwise 'unfavourable' situation. This included having the 'right' relationship, and security and stability in relation to economic and life circumstances. For many of the women there was a suggestion that it was life circumstances, rather than life choices, that would not permit them to become a mother earlier.

The following extract comes from an interview with Rebecca, a first-time mother at 36. The only single mother in the study, Rebecca states that she was ultimately unable to find the right relationship, yet cites the absence of the right partner prior to this time, following a split from a long term partner, as an explanation for her delayed motherhood.

- | | | |
|-----|---------|--|
| 1. | Rebecca | Um and then we split up and and as I (.) kind of gradually (1.0) got |
| 2. | | older I just just never had a (.) a steady relationship (.) again= |
| 3. | KB | =yeah |
| 4. | Rebecca | for (.) any length of time |
| 5. | KB | Hmm |
| 6. | Rebecca | And so it was that really= |
| 7. | KB | =yeah |
| 8. | Rebecca | just chance |
| 9. | KB | Yeah I think that's quite a common= |
| 10. | Rebecca | =I'm going to (.) to= |

12. KB =Yeah
 13. Rebecca carry on [feeding him]
 14. KB [Yeah that's] fine (.) Yeah no worries (.) yeah [short pause
 15. while mum feeds baby] Yeah no I think that's quite a common
 16. Rebecca Yeah
 17. KB Common kind of thing I think=
 18. Rebecca =I I find it quite annoying when you read things in the press about
 19. you know oh they're leaving it too late and (.) biological clock blah
 20. blah blah you just think (.) for a lot of people it isn't a choice it's
 21. just how it happens

(Rebecca, 35)

Here Rebecca considers that it was the absence of the right kind of relationship that impacted on her ability to become a mother earlier. She suggests that her relationships were not of the appropriate nature – “never had a steady relationship” (line 2) or duration – “for any length of time” (line 4) – in which to begin a family. As such, Rebecca invokes a repertoire of circumstance – later motherhood was down to circumstances beyond her control: “so that was it really...just chance” (lines 6-8).

Rebecca critiques stereotypical representations of older mothers in the media where it is assumed that women have agency over the timing of motherhood: “I find it quite annoying when you read things in the press about oh *they're leaving it too late* and (.) biological clock blah blah blah” (lines 18-20). Rebecca resists this by constructing the timing of her pregnancy as an outcome of circumstances: “for a lot of people it isn't a choice. It's just how it happens” (lines 20-21). In doing so she resists the subject position of the ‘selfish older mother’ – as someone someone who ‘selfishly’ delayed childbearing by choice – and as such manages responsibility and accountability for ‘leaving it late’.

The notion that women should wait for the ‘right’ relationship was a common notion throughout the interviews that may have a wider ideological function. Promoting cohesive family units may limit the degree to which the state needs to intervene in family life, particularly financially. However, this repertoire also serves an

interactional function for Rebecca and other older mothers like her. In setting up later motherhood as an outcome of relationship circumstances, accountability or blame is not attributable to them for making 'poor choices'. This function may be particularly important for older mothers as they are effectively able to resist the notion that they chose to put themselves and their babies 'at risk' by delaying motherhood.

The next extract is taken from an interview with Helen, who discussed how her career impacted on timing motherhood, yet also the importance of establishing economic stability. As an Australian national, there was also some uncertainty about whether she and her husband would remain in the UK or move to Australia_which she also attributed to her timing of motherhood.

1. Helen So partly we wanted to wait and see whether we were staying here going
 2. there (.) have a job as well beforehand so that we had (.) some security (.)
 3. rather than being in a position where (.) you know we're trying (.) struggling
 4. (.) financially because I (.) you know was a new mum and then couldn't
 5. work (.) you know because no one (.) will employ you because you know=
 6. KB =Yeah
 7. Helen If that makes sense
 8. KB Yeah
 9. Helen So it was partly just having some security (.) as well as you know partly
 10. career because that's why I hadn't had one (.) before then
 11. KB Yeah
 12. Helen I (.) y'know (.) I'd sort of been too busy I suppose
 13. KB Yeah yeah
 14. Helen Sounds awful
 15. KB No it's just circumstances isn't it I mean
- (Helen, 35)

Like other participants, Helen narrates her timing of motherhood as the outcome of a particular set of circumstances. She describes a number of conditions that needed to be met prior to beginning a family including the practicalities of deciding whereabouts the family would settle, securing a job and financial stability.

Alongside notions of the 'right relationship', stability and economic security are central to what is contemporarily considered to be the 'right situation' to start a family. It is implied that people ought not to have children unless they can afford them, and the

implications of not adhering to this expectation are stark when we consider the treatment of women and families in society who are not employed, may have little economic security and bring up their children on state benefits (Tyler, 2008). Therefore, in emphasizing the difficulties she overcame to occupy a position where she is not struggling financially, Helen effectively distances herself from working-class mothers, who may not have secured such desirable circumstances, preserving her identity as a ‘good’ middle-class mother.

Helen goes on to discuss that her route to later motherhood was partly determined by her career, stating she’d “sort of been too busy” (line 12) to have a baby at that point in her life. Here, Helen’s narrative may be interpreted as a choice to delay motherhood. As such, she risks positioning herself as a ‘selfish older mother’, willfully putting her career before motherhood. Indeed, in making an assessment that this admission “sounds awful” (line 14), Helen recognises that negative inferences may be drawn from her actions – that is, that she ‘selfishly’ delayed motherhood for her career. However, the interviewer’s rebuttal: “no it’s just circumstances” (line 15) signals the overall success of her account that circumstances, rather than choices, dictated the timing of her pregnancy. Moreover, in suggesting she waited for the ‘right’ circumstances, Helen is able to justify her later motherhood by presenting later motherhood as a sensible decision, rather than a ‘selfish choice’. Helen describes wanting to develop precisely those circumstances that are recognized as matching societal definitions of the ‘ideal’ or ‘right’ circumstances in which to begin a family. As such, she presents the idea that she is an older mother for the ‘right’ reasons.

Older Motherhood as ‘Readiness’

The second interpretative repertoire evoked by women was ‘readiness’. Being ‘ready’ to become a mother was something that was either explicitly mentioned, or implied by each of the women interviewed, and this repertoire was largely constituted from notions of self-fulfilment and the perceived importance of obtaining this prior to parenthood, alongside a consideration of their ability to be a ‘good’ parent.

Throughout their interviews many of the women described things they had wanted to achieve and experience prior to motherhood including the development of a career, education, travel and ‘living one’s life’. The following extract comes from the interview with Rachel who gave birth to her first daughter at the age of thirty-five. Rachel described the issues surrounding the timing of her pregnancy as complex and multifaceted. She described her final decision to start trying for a baby as prompted by financial stability, in addition to concerns about her age-related fertility problems (see Locke & Budds (2013) for a wider discussion on risk categorisation and timing of pregnancy). Throughout the interview Rachel also discussed not feeling ‘ready’ to have children until her thirties, which was related to things she wanted to do and achieve before motherhood:

1. KB Do you think it would have been any different if you were in your
2. twenties?
3. Rachel You see with me there’s no way I could have even thought about
4. having kids in my twenties
5. KB Yeah
6. Rachel I just wasn’t ready for it I liked (.) my life and I liked my (.) erm
7. going out and travelling (.) and all the things (.) that came with that
8. and I’m just I’m really glad I did it later
9. KB Hmm
10. Rachel Really really glad because I wouldn’t want (.) cos now I feel like (.)
11. not that’s it (.) but I feel like it’s such a change
12. KB Hmm
13. Rachel And you (.) I mean we (.) we’re probably gonna carry on (.)
14. regardless to some extent and still go on different holidays and
15. still do a lot of the things and hopefully not do too much of this kind
16. of family stuff that (.) y’know where you go to Wacky Warehouses
17. and stuff like that and go to parties every weekend and we’re
18. really (.) fairly (.) convinced we’re not gonna do that sort of stuff so

19. we've gotta (.) try not to do it so

(Rachel, 35)

In response to the interviewer's question as to whether Rachel thinks that motherhood would have been any different had she had her daughter in her twenties, Rachel explains why she would not have had children at this time. Drawing on a readiness repertoire, she describes the possibility of having children as unthinkable, owing to the fact that she was not ready: "there's no way I could have even thought about having kids in my twenties...I just wasn't ready for it" (lines 3-6). Rachel continues by equating her lack of readiness to her fondness for her situation in life, whereby she could pursue activities as she pleased: "I just wasn't ready for it I liked (.) my life and I liked my (.) erm going out and travelling (.) and all the things (.) that came with that and I'm just I'm really glad I did it later" (lines 6-8).

As noted earlier, notions of 'being oneself' and 'pleasing oneself' are central to both a postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007) and neoliberal discourses, and are the cornerstone of the values of individualist western cultures. As such, Rachel's aspirations are not understood as selfish, but are justified as some that any woman of today might reasonably pursue, particularly given the dramatic change prompted by becoming a parent, as articulated by Rachel: "cos now I feel like (.) not that's it (.) but I feel like it's such a change" (lines 10-11). Although she acknowledges that parenthood does not necessarily signal the end of life beyond children, Rachel recognises the enormity of the impact that becoming a mother has on lifestyle choices. That is, one's life becomes largely child-centred, such that the activities one pursues are expected to be those that best meet the needs and desires of the child – referred to by Rachel as "family stuff" – going to Wacky Warehousesⁱⁱ and children's parties. As such, Rachel notes that she

was “really glad” she spent time pursuing other activities prior to motherhood, as these are difficult to achieve when one has a child and is expected to prioritise their needs.

The concept of ‘readiness’ then, for Rachel, is constructed as a perceived ability to relinquish the things she enjoyed in life prior to having children, in accordance with the ideology of ‘good’, child-centred motherhood (Hays, 1996). That is, she argues that she would not have been ready to do this in her twenties and as such implicitly supposes that she would not have lived up to societal standards of what makes a ‘good’ mother. Thus, we might observe the impact that discourses of ‘good’ motherhood and the prevailing ideology of intensive motherhood have on women’s reproductive decision-making or ‘choices’ about when to become a mother. We might suggest that discourses of ‘good’ motherhood have the power to shape women’s feelings of readiness to mother.

The following two extracts come from the interview with Chloe. In response to a similar question asked of Rachel regarding whether she supposed motherhood would have been at all different had she had her daughter in her twenties, Chloe revealed that she had become pregnant in her mid-twenties, but decided to have a termination owing to her circumstances at that time. The next extract begins with Chloe’s discussion of this.

1. Chloe Yep (.) I think I’d have probably I mean (.) it’s awful to say that I
2. was pregnant and I was twenty-five obviously um (.) and it sounds
3. terrible but I know at the time it was a it was it wasn’t some a it
4. was a lifestyle choice but I was (.) the f’ the guy I was living well
5. I was living with a French guy in France=
6. KB =Hmm
7. Chloe =and then I came back to England (.) and I got pregnant when he
8. was living in France so we made the decision not to go ahead with
9. it=
10. KB =hmm
11. Chloe = because (.) well I made the decision because I was the one
12. earning money and I was (.) in a career and all the rest of it and

13. he was (.) it just sounds awful but it just would have (.) stopped life
14. in its tracks I think for me

(Chloe, 41)

In this extract Chloe attributes her decision to terminate a pregnancy in her twenties to the perceived impact it would have had on her life at that time. In doing so, she hints at the intensity of motherhood: “it just sounds awful, but it just would have (.) stopped life in its tracks I think for me” (lines 13-14). Here, Chloe hints at the intensity of modern motherhood (Hays, 1996) as she argues that becoming a parent earlier would have limited her ability to move forward with her career.

The difficulties women experience combining employment and motherhood have been widely discussed (e.g. Asher, 2011), with societal definitions of the ‘good mother’ and ‘good employee’ – both of which place significant importance on dedication of time and commitment – placing contradictory and unrealistic demands on women (Hays, 1996). Moreover, it may be argued that contemporary definitions of ‘good motherhood’, with an emphasis on being selfless and child-centred, constrain women’s abilities to pursue anything outside of it. As such, owing to the inherent difficulties in combining career and motherhood, later motherhood and putting a career first effectively makes sense and so Chloe’s account, similar to Rachel’s, hints at the way in which societal discourses of ‘good’ motherhood may shape and constrain women’s reproductive decision-making.

However, in the next extract taken from Chloe’s interview, four lines after the close of the first, Chloe carefully manages her decision to have a termination and put her career before motherhood in order to avoid being positioned as a ‘selfish older mother’.

1. Chloe But I mean I went to university and I left (.) and I thought well I’m
2. now gonna have a career and (.) that was (.) y’know (.) sounds
3. awful doesn’t it? But that’s (.) kind of=
4. KB =Doesn’t sound awful at all=

5. Chloe =One of those decisions you know
 6. KB Yeah
 7. Chloe Whereas I think the thing about having [daughter] at forty-one was
 8. that we were so desperate to have her, we really wanted to have
 9. her (.) and we were really excited when I got pregnant and it
 10. worked (.) and we'd been through three years and=
 11. KB =Yep
 12. Chloe a lot of money (.) to get pregnant, god it cost a lot (.) to do IVF so
 13. (.) she was absolutely wanted from day one

Again, Chloe draws upon a repertoire of readiness as she narrates the life trajectory she wished to follow prior to motherhood and ultimately, what she describes as the reasons for her termination in her twenties: “I went to university and I left (.) and I thought well I’m now gonna have a career” (lines 1-2). As such, one interpretation of her termination is that it was a life choice, which enabled her to pursue her career unhindered. However, Chloe’s repetition of phrases such as “it’s awful to say”, “sounds terrible” and “sounds awful”, hint that this admission is problematic. In addition, they demonstrate her awareness of the negative inferences that might be drawn from her decision to privilege her career over motherhood, particularly, perhaps, since it involved the termination of a pregnancy. However, following this, Chloe goes on to justify this decision and her timing of motherhood through taking steps to construct herself as ‘ready’ to be a mother. She does so by emphasising the degree to which she wanted a baby at this (later) time of her life. Chloe effectively constructs her pregnancy at 41 as something she was not just ready for, but *desperate* for. This is in stark contrast to her pregnancy at twenty-five which she considered would stop life in its tracks for her. Contrasting discourse, such as this, functions to emphasise change or transition and highlight the differences between descriptions (Smith, 1978). Here, it functions to emphasize the difference in Chloe’s readiness for parenthood. The desperation for Chloe and her partner to have a baby at that time in their life is further evidenced by her description of the amount of time they had been trying for a baby, in

addition to the amount of money they had spent on IVF treatment: “we’d been through three years and...a lot of money to get pregnant, god it cost a lot to do IVF” (lines 10-12). Through this account Chloe effectively positions herself as a ‘good’ or ‘better’ mother now that she is ‘ready’ and having a child at a time in her life where her baby was “absolutely wanted from day one” (line 13).

Discussion

The focus of this paper has been to explore accounts of the timing of motherhood in ‘older’ first-time mothers. A discourse of choice permeates assumptions about the timing of motherhood in women’s life trajectories (Sevón, 2005). This leads to the assumption that older mothers are those who have chosen to delay motherhood, which is of particular significance for women over 35. This is owing, firstly, to concern about the increase in risks to both mother and baby that correspond with maternal age. Secondly, there are stereotypical assumptions about why these women ‘delay’ motherhood, which present the idea that these women have delayed motherhood in favour of a career or other ‘self-interested’ pursuits (Bewley et al., 2005). As a result, the morality of older mothers may be questioned, since they are seemingly putting both themselves and their babies at undue risk (Budds et al., 2013; Locke & Budds, 2013) and may be positioned as responsible for any unfavourable outcomes associated with the timing of their pregnancies. It is this positioning that perhaps prompted our participants to carefully manage accountability and to justify delayed motherhood.

Among our participants explanations for the timing of motherhood were often multiple and complex, rather than the outcome of a direct choice. Moreover, some of the women in the study actively critiqued this assumption and worked to resist the ‘selfish older mother’ subject position that accompanies it. This resonates with the findings of

Shelton and Johnson (2006) who found that older mothers over 30 resisted negative discourses by constructing their experience in a positive light, emphasising their maturity and psychological readiness to mother.

In this paper we identify two dominant repertoires which women drew upon to make sense of the timing of their motherhood: 'older motherhood as circumstance' and 'older motherhood as readiness'. Whilst the decisions made by our participants about the timing of their motherhood may be interpreted as a choice, we attempt to highlight the constraints placed on these women's choices. That is, we consider the social and material conditions which prescribe the right conditions for parenthood and may shape women's decision-making around the timing of motherhood.

The importance attached to parenting in the correct circumstances is clear when we consider the judgement of those who choose to begin a family in the 'wrong' situation. For example, it has been argued that the reproductive choices of teenage mothers are scrutinized because they are choosing an alternative life trajectory from their middle-class peers. In eschewing the normative expectations of education, career, then family, they are also choosing a path that fails to satisfy governmental objectives in that they risk becoming financially dependent on the state (Wilson & Huntington, 2006). Therefore, in drawing upon the first repertoire the women were able to present later motherhood as an outcome of circumstances beyond their control – a need to secure the right situation – rather than a 'selfish choice'. As a result, they were able to resist responsibility for the timing of their pregnancies and thereby manage accountability and blame for 'leaving it too late'. These findings notably contrast with the findings of Jaques and Radtke (2012) where young women emphasised choice and autonomy, positioning themselves as responsible for their decisions around future employment,

marriage and motherhood and glossing over the impact that social norms or expectations may have on their choices.

Additionally we examined current understandings of good motherhood and the impact these may have on women's choices around the timing of pregnancy. The current requirements are for mothering to be intensive and child-centred and for mothers to be selfless and sacrificial (Lee et al., 2014). The 'ideology of intensive mothering' (Hays, 1996) has been described as the normative standard of mothering practices (Arendell, 2000). It has become a moral imperative, such that women who align with this approach may be considered good mothers, whilst those unable to meet these standards are the subjects of deviancy discourses (Arendell, 2000). The imperative to mother intensively is said to cross class boundaries, but nonetheless has a regulatory effect on women's mothering practices (Lee et al., 2014). Romagnoli and Wall argue that for middle-class women intensive mothering defines good motherhood, whilst for the low-income mothers in their sample, aligning with it enabled them to distance themselves from negative stereotypes associated with other low-income mothers (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). As such, when it comes to meeting the requirements of intensive motherhood, the stakes are high.

Our findings suggest that not only does the imperative of intensive mothering regulate women's behaviour as mothers, it may also shape women's decision making around the timing of motherhood. Many women in our study considered that they were now – at this age – able to meet the standards of intensive motherhood and forgo their own interests, having had sufficient time to have a bit of 'a life of their own' (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). As such, we argue that women's 'readiness' to mother is, to some extent, culturally defined. That is, they are only ready when they are able to relinquish other aspects of their life in order to be a good child-centred, intensive mother. By

drawing on this 'readiness' repertoire, the women were able to present older motherhood as desirable in that it would enable them to meet the requirements of 'good' mothers.

The concept of readiness to be a mother has already been identified in the literature on 'delayed' motherhood (e.g. Cooke et al., 2010; Shelton & Johnson, 2006), yet the way in which societal definitions of good motherhood may, to some extent, shape women's feelings of readiness is yet to be considered. Further to this, it could be suggested that ideologies of intensive child-centred motherhood may help to explain the trend for women to 'delay' motherhood.

We recognise that some women may feel they have choice and agency around the timing of their pregnancy. Indeed, our participants' accounts of delayed motherhood may be interpreted as a choice. Whilst our intention is not to 'rid' women of this, we feel it is important to examine the ways in which the notion that women have choice around the timing of parenthood can be problematic, owing to the accountability such a choice can bring with it. Moreover, it seems that women may only make choices around the timing of motherhood so long as they are making the 'right' choices. Those who are perceived to be timing motherhood incorrectly are then forced to account for and justify that decision.

Implicit, and often explicit, within concerns raised about delayed motherhood is that something needs to be done. Therefore, there are additional implications of this research for any attempts to counteract the trend towards delayed motherhood. Those who document the increase in medical risks associated with delayed motherhood suggest women be given more information about the risks, so that they can make informed decisions about the timing of their pregnancies (e.g. Bewley et al., 2005).

However, as this paper shows, assuming women have direct control over the timing of motherhood is too simplistic. Therefore, we would suggest that any consideration of the trend towards older motherhood should look beyond the decision-making processes of individual women and consider the social and cultural context within which these decisions are being made.

Notes

ⁱ However, 'older' motherhood is a socially constructed and variable category and there are indications that definitions of this category may be changing. For example, within the NHS in England, women are marked out as in need of particular attention at age 40 and over.

ⁱⁱ 'Wacky Warehouse' is a brand of children's soft play and activity centres, based in the UK.

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