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Title: **Too old to parent? Discursive representations of late parenting in the British press**

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Too old Too old to parent? Discursive representations of late parenting in the British press

Abstract

Focusing on a corpus of 90 UK newspaper articles (2008-2013) on late parenting (40+), this study examines the framing via different dimensions of age in the press coverage of such parents and parenting. Five main frames emerged: social change; personal frame; risks of late parenting; older continued parenting; and reproductive technology enabled parenting. The relationship of these framings to the discursive construction of ageing and late parenting reveals varying positionings of older parents that tend to reinforce, but also at times challenge, conventional expectations of 'age-appropriate' timing of reproduction, especially regarding women. Media Framing Analysis, critical discourse analysis and a social constructionist orientation to age(ing) and lifespan identity are drawn on in the analysis. The study also highlights how framing, as a concept from communication theory, together with different perspectives to ageing and different dimensions of age, can complement discourse analysis of news texts.

Author biography

Virpi Ylänne is Senior Lecturer in Language and Communication at Cardiff University in Wales, UK. Her research interests include discursive representations of ageing in the media; social construction of lifespan identities, and reproductive biographies at later age. She has published e.g. on advertising images of older people and edited a collection *Representing Ageing. Images and Identities* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

Introduction: age, ageing and parenting

Discourse analytic studies on ageing and age identity are still relatively scarce as compared to studies on other aspects of identity, such as gender, sexuality or ethnicity, for example. A case for a dynamic perspective on age identity has, however, convincingly been made by interactional sociolinguists and social and cultural gerontologists (e.g. Angouri, 2012; N Coupland, 2004; J Coupland, 2009; Featherstone and Hepworth, 2005; Nikander, 2009; Ylänne, 2012). From this perspective, age, like other aspects of our personal and social identities, is contextually defined and socially constructed. Although there is a biological basis for our chronological age that may set limits to such constructions, 'the ageing process cannot be adequately explained solely in biological and medical terms but is an interactive process involving social and cultural factors' (Featherstone and Hepworth, 2005: 355). Interactive processes through which age(ing) can be negotiated in talk and interaction include discursive age identification strategies (e.g. Coupland, Coupland and Giles, 1991; Nikander, 2002). The media, such as advertising (e.g. Coupland, 2007; Chen and Ylänne, 2012) and news press (e.g. Rozanova, 2006), are another site for discursive formulation of age identities. Social and cultural factors include age stereotypes and expectations of 'age appropriate' milestones and roles along the life course. One such role is that of a parent, the focus of this study.

Ageing can be approached from different perspectives, such as biological, psychological, sociological (Bond et al., 2007) in addition to discourse analytic / linguistic. Age itself has different dimensions, although we tend to link it with chronological age. Laslett (1989) distinguished between five dimensions of age: chronological, biological, social, personal and subjective. According to Laslett, whilst subjective self is more enduring and unchanging, personal and social ages change with individuals' own or their environment's assessments of the age reached, respectively. Ginn and Arber (1995: 5-7) proposed three 'meanings of age': chronological (calendar) age, physiological age (a medical construct of the physical ageing of the body) and social age (constructed by social attitudes to age appropriate behaviour). Social age for Ginn and Arber also includes 'subjective perceptions (how old one feels)', so their framework is rather similar to Laslett's. Ginn and Arber suggest that all three meanings interrelate, are socially constructed and gendered (they 'operate differently for women and men'). Laslett's and Ginn and Arber's categories suggest that age identification (by self and others) is a multi-determined process. This phenomenon has rarely been investigated in relation to late parenting - having a (first) child at an 'older' age. What is more, cultural and social gerontological work (exemplified by Laslett and Ginn & Arber) seldom centres on micro level analysis of language. In analysing newspaper articles on older parents, I aim to link the different dimensions and

perspectives to age and ageing with different frames of newspaper representation, to contribute to interdisciplinary work on discursive aspects of age.

Karp (1988: 728) suggests that 'adult development is tied less to chronological age per se than to the timing of events within the contexts of work and family'. Events such as children entering adulthood, leaving home or having their own children characterise a shift from young to mid-life age identification for parents. Late parenting, however, does not fit neatly into a rigid conceptualisation of lifespan identities and categories: adults becoming parents later in life flout the norms of 'youth' and their mid-life and old age developmental stages might be considered blurred, making the categorisation of late parents potentially problematic. Indeed, current notions of social categories see them as less firmly fixed (e.g. Giddens, 1991). Where lifespan categories were once closely associated with chronological age, in postmodernity age related roles, transitions and rhythms in life periods have changed and are changing (Neugarten and Neugarten, 1996). There is more flexibility now than ever in the timing, frequency and nature of events such as marriage, childbearing or retirement, for example, across the lifespan. This study will focus on ageing and parenting and seeks to uncover how newspaper discourse represents late / older parents in relation to the 'norm'.

I will now briefly review a small selection of studies on older first time parenting, followed by a review of a selection of studies on media representations of older parents. These offer a background to some of the analytical themes taken up later and provide a point of comparison and expansion.

Delayed motherhood

Older motherhood is not a new social practice (Friese, Becker and Nachtigall 2008: 65). What is a more recent trend in developed societies, however, is *delayed* motherhood (/parenting), reflected in the steady increase in maternal age at the birth of the *first* child. Whereas in 1970 in England and Wales this was 23.7 years, in 2013 it was 28.3 years. In 2013, over half (51%) of all live births (first and subsequent children) were to mothers aged 30 and over, and nearly two-thirds (66%) of fathers were aged 30 and over (excluding births registered solely by the mother) *(Office for National Statistics*, 2014). Locke and Budds (2013) argue that the definition of 'older motherhood' is principally a medical one and based on risk categorisation strategies - the term 'elderly primigravida' was reportedly first used in 1958 in an obstetric context to refer to women having their first baby at age 35 and over. The precise definition of 'older mother' varies from context to context, however.

Another recent trend is late motherhood enabled by assisted reproductive technologies, such as in vitro fertilisation and donor egg, giving women opportunities to bear children towards the end of their reproductive cycle and even after the menopause. Such technologies facilitate parenting for those facing problems conceiving, whilst the use of donor sperm and surrogate mothers offer parenting for a more diverse population than before in terms of gender, sexuality or coupledom.

A woman's level of educational attainment positively correlates with maternal age at the birth of first child (Dion, 1995; Wilkie, 1981). Factors such as paid employment in professional-level occupations and psychological involvement in one's work have also been found to play a role in delayed motherhood (Dion, 1995). Postponing parenting might also stem from concerns about establishing better financial security and the desire for a period of personal freedom before embarking on the responsibilities of parenthood (Wilkie, 1981). Mills, Lavender and Lavender (2015: 88) point out, however, that 'the causes underlying the rise in advanced maternal age are incompletely understood'.

On the other hand, higher probability of infertility (especially in women), pregnancy-related complications and health risks to the foetus are reported to increase with age (35 years typically cited as a significant milestone), and 'dramatically after 40' (Bewley, Davies and Braude, 2005: 588). In interviews with women who had

had their first baby at age 35+, Locke and Budds (2013: 538) found that 'the risk discourses that identified decreasing fertility with increasing maternal age influenced their decision about pregnancy'. One source of risk discourses of infertility and other risks of delayed childbearing is newspapers and we will return to the risk theme in the analysis below. Another prominent theme in Locke and Budds' interviewees' stories was a perceived conflict between the biological context (their biological age; 'ticking biological clock') and the social/personal context of not yet feeling ready for motherhood. This exemplifies the different dimensions of age (biological vs. social/personal) that will be examined below but which have not been previously looked at in newspaper discourse on late parenting.

Shelton and Johnson (2006) interviewed professional women who had become mothers over the age of 30. Narrative analysis revealed the women's experiences of contradictory emotions (articulated as a 'double-edged sword') whilst integrating into mothering: the benefits of delayed parenting in terms of psychological readiness were counterbalanced by difficulties in adjusting to the new role and giving up some positive aspects of one's identity as a working professional. At an ideological level of analysis, the narratives displayed interviewees' attempts to position themselves in relation to dominant narratives (or discourses) of a 'good mother' as well as within 'normative' developmental female life plans, which regard motherhood as a natural progression. I

will also consider the relevance of the ideology of 'good mothering / parenting' to my data.

Delayed childbearing as part of the profile of a new middle age and the changing life course was the focus of Friese et al.'s (2008) interview study of heterosexual couples who had used a donor egg to conceive. From a symbolic interactionist perspective on identity and stigma (e.g. Goffman, 1963), Friese et al. document the careful identity work that the women in particular reported to have engaged in to manage their personal and social identities as older infertile mothers. De-stigmatising practices included 'normalising' older motherhood by trying to 'pass' (Goffman, 1963) as a younger mother (for example via appearance) or by linking older motherhood with discourses of 'good mothering'. These strategies exemplify the challenges that older mothering pose to individuals' personal and social identities. The three studies above relate to the different dimensions of age identities but do not explore these explicitly. None of the studies look at the language in any detail, either, nor consider the influence of the news media.

Media representations of late parenting

Whilst personal accounts can be revealing about individual and societal orientations to older parenting, the focus of this study is newspaper representations.

The media at large is a resource for adults to learn what a parenting role entails and to make 'judgements on what counts as valid and desirable parenting practices' (Assarsson and Aarsand, 2011: 78). Constructions of 'good parenting' are found in various media, including TV (e.g. Assarsson and Aarsand, 2011), parenting magazines (e.g. Sunderland, 2006), websites (e.g. Dolev and Zeedyk, 2006) and advertising (e.g. Lazar, 2000), but relatively few studies have focused on media representations of *older* parents.

Previous research on representations of older parents in UK news media has tended to concentrate on late motherhood, as opposed to parenting (both parents). For example, Budds, Locke and Burr (2013) used social constructionist thematic analysis of UK press and focused on how the topics of 'choice' and 'risk' were handled in discussions of delayed motherhood. They found that 'the media position women as wholly responsible for choosing the timing of pregnancy and, as a consequence, as accountable for the associated risks' (p. 132); women can therefore be blamed for any adverse consequences. Budds et al. link this positioning with neoliberal discourses of autonomous, self-governing individuals and we will return to this theme below.

Hadfield, Rudoe and Sanderson-Mann (2007) examined representations of motherhood in British print media in relation to choice, age and fertility. They comment on newspapers' continued scrutiny and criticism of motherhood by

teenagers, older women and those delaying motherhood, all of whom might be considered to challenge traditional forms of motherhood. More recently, Mills et al. (2015), on the other hand, found predominantly positive or at least neutral representations of pregnancy and childbearing in women over 35 in a qualitative thematic analysis of a sizeable sample of British national newspapers, popular magazines and TV programmes. Delayed childbearing was generally endorsed by these data. This was explained partly by the coverage of celebrities and mothers who were below the age of menopause, so the social status and age of the women seems to be an important factor in the stance taken by the media.

Shaw and Giles (2009) uncovered negative orientations in UK newspapers relating to the 'unnaturalness' of older mothering but also representations of older mothers as selfish or self-indulgent, enjoying motherhood as a luxury or a privilege. There are clearly some contrastive findings that emerge from this short review and it seems justified to concentrate on one data set in more detail. Shaw and Giles' proposal for Media Framing Analysis (see also Giles and Shaw, 2009; Giles, Shaw and Morgan, 2009) (to investigate e.g. older parenting) has informed the current study and I will now move on to the concept of framing in news discourse.

Framing news discourse, MFA and CDA

In the field of communication, framing has become a prevalent concept, including in analyses of news media. The origins of framing theory lie in cognitive psychology and anthropology (Bartlett, 1932; Bateson, 1955, both cited in Van Gorp, 2007) and it has also been adopted in disciplines such as sociology (e.g. Goffman, 1974) and linguistics (e.g. Tannen, 1979), among others. One of the most well-known attempts at devising a methodology for framing research in a media context is that by Entman (e.g. 1993). Entman (2004: 5) summarises a 'standard definition of framing' as 'selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution'. In his model, whilst 'frames' reside in texts, any gaps in news framing are filled by the audience, using their existing schemas or 'interpretive processes' (Entman, 2004: 6, 23).

There are many contrasting definitions of 'frame', which can be seen as properties not just of (media) texts, but also individuals or groups. Whereas from a cognitive perspective, prior knowledge in individuals' minds mediates the power of frames, a critical perspective examines the links of news frames with hegemonic processes. Constructionist framing research looks for journalists' creation of 'interpretive packages' about topical issues (D'Angelo, 2002: 877) and acknowledges the audience's active meaning-constructing role. The location of frames can also vary:

they can exist in the minds of journalists, the audience, in media content and in culture, for example (Van Gorp, 2007). My treatment of frames draws on social constructionism and acknowledges an important cultural element in frames and framing; news producers and the audience share a 'cultural stock of frames' (Van Gorp, 2007: 62). However, I also combine this with a critical perspective, since news discourse is likely to promote specific hegemonic representations of parenting.

Giles and Shaw (2009) introduce Media Framing Analysis (MFA) for the psychological study of how media frame topics and direct the audience's interpretations. MFA comprises both a mainly quantitative macroanalysis of a broad dataset and a qualitative microanalysis of selected materials. A macroanalytic screening of the selected material for relevance is followed by linking each article to a specific event as the source or origin of the story. Characters in news stories are identified. These, as well as various framing devices, such as headlines or visual elements; features such as use of quotes, adjectives and other descriptors associated with characters, are linked with a consideration of who the reader is invited to identify with. This exemplifies MFA's concerns with news influence. The analysis of the narrative structure might reveal authors' use of familiar storytelling conventions (e.g. heroes vs. villains) as part of the framing. An analysis of language categories at a macrolevel might focus more on content, but go into a more detailed linguistic analysis

at a microlevel, pointing to the possibility of bringing in aspects of Critical Discourse

Analysis (CDA) into the analysis. Lastly, generalisation places news stories within the

wider socio-cultural context and ongoing debates.

Besides drawing on MFA, this study is informed by a Critical Discourse Analytic

orientation to language. Such an orientation recognises 'the relevance of the social,

cultural, political and economic background against which texts are written and read'

(Mautner, 2008: 44) and emphasises the dialectic between language and the social.

Discourse is viewed as an activity and as social practice. Discourse – here news

discourse - is 'socially constitutive as well as socially shaped: it constitutes situations,

objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people

and groups of people. It is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and

reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it'

(Fairclough and Wodak, 1997: 258). The role of discourse in the production,

reproduction or resistance of social inequalities, hierarchies and hegemonies has been

the focus of CDA (or Critical Discourse Studies, CDS). There is a sizeable body of such

work on news texts (although not on late parenting and age), since 'journalism has

more power to shape our understanding about events, ideas, people and the

relationships between people, than many other forms of communication' (Richardson,

2007: 220).

Instead of a close CDA analysis, however, I will examine the predominant themes in the discursive representation of older parents in my data and, in particular, how the articles are framed. In order to examine British news discourse on older parenting, the following Research Questions (RQs) are addressed:

1. How is late motherhood/fatherhood and parenting represented in UK newspaper texts?

2. What are the predominant frames of representation and how do they link with different perspectives on ageing?

3. What links between the lifespan, ageing and parenting do these press representations of older parents construct?

Before moving into the analysis, I now briefly introduce the data corpus.

Data and sampling

The data corpus comprises 90 articles (c. 70,000 words) which appeared in UK national and regional newspapers over the six year period from January 2008 to December 2013, collected using the online database *Nexis*. To find articles that covered late parenting, search terms <u>old</u> and <u>late</u> (and their derivatives) were used, together with <u>parent</u> (and derivatives). Articles returned by *Nexis* search were sorted by relevance and the first 250 articles were reviewed for each year. An initial search yielded 102

articles that were deemed relevant but duplicate coverage was eliminated from the corpus.

Of the 90 articles, 51 (57%) appeared in the national or regional tabloid press and 36 (40%) in national broadsheets. In three instances (3%), the source could not be attributed to a specific newspaper. Of the tabloids, *The Daily Mail/ Mail Online/ Mail on Sunday* provided most of the data (18 articles in total; 20% of the total data corpus), followed by *Belfast Telegraph* (6 articles, 7%). Of the broadsheets, *The Times / Sunday Times* were represented most (16 articles; 18%), followed by *The Daily Telegraph / Sunday Telegraph* (10 articles, 11%) and *The Independent* (5 articles, 6%). In terms of the gender focus of the articles in all papers, 41 (46%) focused solely or predominantly on women or mothers, 29 (32%) on men or fathers and 20 (22%) on both genders / parents. These distributions are summarised in table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of articles by publication and gender focus

Focus	Broadsheet	Tabloid	Other	N
Women	18	22	1	41
Men	8	19	2	29
Both	10	10	0	20
N	36	51	3	90

As to the categories of article, both short and longer news items were the most frequent in both the tabloid and broadsheet press (27 and 17 articles, respectively), followed by features (17 and 12 articles, respectively), opinion or comment columns (5 and 4 articles, respectively), letters (2 and 1, respectively) and one editorial in each type of paper. After this initial broad analysis, the origin of each article (its 'news peg') was examined, followed by the categorisation of articles in terms of their overall frames as well as any sub-frames.

News pegs and frames

News articles are triggered by specific recent events or current social issues and debates and commonly centre on an identifiable 'news peg'. Editorial publication decisions are in turn influenced by perceived news values (e.g. Bednarek and Caple, 2014; Bell, 1991; Hardcup and O'Neill, 2001). In the current corpus, six main news pegs were identified in the coverage of older parents and parenting: celebrity news; new research and scientific discoveries; newly released official demographic statistics; personal stories contributing to social debate or reacting to other stories about age and parenting (the latter constituting a 'secondary news peg' (Giles and Shaw, 2009: 384)); stories covering 'exceptional cases' (having the news value of surprise or 'superlativeness'); and relevant events, books or TV programmes.

In the current pervasive era of celebrity culture (e.g. Cashmore, 2006) it is unsurprising that celebrities as older parents featured prominently in the corpus (Hardcup and O'Neill, 2001, include 'celebrity' in their list of news values, too). What differentiates these articles from the rest of the corpus is their main focus on male celebrities (such as Elton John, Rod Stewart, Van Morrison and Mel Gibson), although female celebrities (such as Madonna, Nicole Kidman and Halle Berry) also featured in many articles as reference points for the main story lines. The featured male celebrities (unlike females) were typically not first time parents but parenting in new relationships with younger women. The articles were nevertheless included in the corpus as age was a prominent feature. Some of the headlines (which often also point to the frame adopted) of these articles included:

He's my old man; Dads who have a bus pass and a baby (*The Mirror*, 4.4.2011)

Old age dad; Fatherhood joy for the 60-plus stars (*Daily Record*, 31.1.2009)

Elton is the latest to join the celebrity adoption club (*Daily Mail*, 14.9.2009)

The second 'peg', new research, either covered studies on demographic changes, or scientific discoveries regarding advances in assisted reproductive technologies or links between potential medical risks of late parenting. Headlines here included:

An older mum or dad increases autism risk (*Mail on Sunday* 5.2.2012)

Surge in Down's pregnancies as women delay becoming mothers (*The Times* 27.1.2009)

Egg screening breakthrough can double IVF success rate (*The Daily Telegraph* 19.10.2009)

Thirdly, articles that originated from the release of 'latest figures' typically reported statistics from the *Office for National Statistics* on increases in parental, particularly maternal ages or reported some relevant governmental action and included headlines such as:

Mothers over 40 in record baby boom (*Daily Mail* 26.5.2010)

How old will I be when you die, mummy? (*Daily Mail* 27.5.2010)

Older people will be encouraged to adopt as guidelines are relaxed (*The Daily Telegraph* 21.2.2011)

Fourthly, opinion and comment columns or features afforded debate on the merits or threats of late parenting (commenting on a 'trend'), at times via personal experiences about parenting later in life. Headlines for these included:

Sherry, golf and cruises? I'm too busy with stabilisers and seesaws (*The Times*, 23.6.2009)

Mother of all parenting questions: how old is too old? (*Edinburgh Evening News*, 19.1.2010)

Having babies in our 40s made us better mothers (*The Express*, 12.7.2010)

Fifthly, articles with the news value of 'unexpectedness' covered either news stories or features of postmenopausal mothers (in the UK or elsewhere) or men becoming fathers at an advanced age. For example:

World's oldest mum gives birth to twins (*Sunday Life* 13.7.2008)

Woman, 59, has twins after IVF in India (*The Times* 30.5.2008)

Aged 71, oldest father of twins in Britain (*Daily Mail* 31.1.2009)

Lastly, a new book or upcoming programme or an event such as a conference might focus on older parenting, although such articles were in a small minority. For a handful of articles, a news peg was difficult to identify.

Some of the relevant characters in the articles can already be seen from the above. Older parents are either female or male, celebrities or not, discussed as individuals, couples or collectively, based in or outside the UK, and with ages varying from 40s to 60s or 70s. In addition, a range of professionals, such as doctors, other medical personnel, scientists, academics or representatives of various relevant institutions are referred to and quoted for expert opinions. Instead of analysing various characters, I will concentrate on the parents themselves.

To ascertain the overall framing of the articles, an iterative process of constant comparison (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) of articles in the data corpus was conducted.

Initially, accompanying the selection of articles for the corpus, a preliminary

identification of themes was carried out by two people (the author and a research

assistant), who each read the articles independently and compared notes. Further

coding and assigning the articles into categories corresponding with different frames

was carried out by the author alone, grouping articles on the basis of headlines, main

focus, characters, referring expressions and pronouns, and genre. Five main frames

emerged: social change frame; personal frame; risks frame; continuing parenting/not

first time parenting frame and IVF/reproductive technology frame. I acknowledge that

'coming up with the names for frames itself involves a kind of framing' (Tankard, 2001:

89, quoted in Van Gorp, 2007: 72), but to minimise subjectivity, I was partly guided by

previous research, such as Giles and Shaw (2009) for comparison and opted for broad

categories so as to address RQ 2. As is often the case with thematic coding, frames can

intersect. For example, articles on social change sometimes included references to

risks of older parenting. The overall, main frame needed to be determined. The

distribution of the frames in the type of publication is displayed in table 2, with a list of

sub-frames that were also inductively generated within each main frame.

Table 2: Overall framing of articles and their distribution

Frame	N	Paper
1.*Social Change* 　　Late parenting as challenging and problematic 　　Pros and cons of late parenting 　　Gender differences in late parenting 　　Late parenting as better parenting	31 (34%)	Broadsheet: 13 Tabloid: 17 Other: 1
2. *Personal frame* 　　Parenting as a journey 　　Pros and cons of late parenting 　　Advantages / joys of late parenting 　　Disadvantages / regrets of late parenting	22 (24%)	Broadsheet: 4 Tabloid: 18
3. *Risks of older parenting* 　　Mother related 　　Father related 　　Both parents; variety of challenges	16 (18%)	Broadsheets: 10 Tabloid: 5 Other: 1
4. *Continued / Not first time parenting* 　　Celebrity trend 　　Fulfilling fatherhood 　　Unconventional couple	12 (13%)	Broadsheets: 4 Tabloids: 7 Other: 1
5. *IVF / technology enabled parenting* 　　New reproductive technique 　　Ethics 　　Exceptional circumstances	9 (10%)	Broadsheets: 5 Tabloids: 4

The majority of the articles, across the papers, in the social change and the personal frame appeared as feature articles and/or in the newspaper's supplements. The risks frame appeared typically as a short news item but there were also four features, some written by the paper's medical correspondent. Continued/not first time older parenting frame appeared as often in features as in news (home / celebrity) across the papers. The fifth frame, IVF/technology enabled late parenting, was represented by news items in broadsheets and tabloids. Some of these were front-page news about new assisted reproductive technologies.

Frame construction of older parents and late parenting

There are various potential framing devices that could be brought into the analysis of representations of older parents. However, due to the online sampling method, no visual elements, including page layout, accompanying photos, illustrations or semiotic details such as the fonts or their size that would appear in the print version were available. *Nexis* was used to facilitate searches across all UK newspapers for a chronologically retrospective sample. I have approached the texts as retrieved via *Nexis* and will now exemplify the discursive construction of each of the frames in relation to the RQs mentioned above. It will be possible to only give short examples in each case.

Social change

Articles within this frame ranged from ones presenting late parenting as challenging and problematic to ones weighing up the 'pros and cons' of late parenting more equally. A small number focused on gender differences in late parenting or presented late parenting as 'better' parenting.

An example of an article in this frame is one in *The Daily Mail* (S. Doughty, social affairs correspondent, 26.5.2010) (... indicates omitted text):

MOTHERS OVER 40 IN RECORD BABY BOOM

NUMBER OF WOMEN WHO GIVE BIRTH IN THEIR FIFTH DECADE OR LATER TREBLES

A BABY boom among older women has trebled the number giving birth after their 40th birthday. Almost 27,000 babies were born to mothers over 40 last year, figures revealed yesterday...Britain now has one of the highest birth rates for older women in the world, with 3.8 per cent of all babies born to mothers over 40. ...But the trend has led medical experts to warn that older women face greater risks of miscarriages and complications – with calls for the NHS [National Health Service] *to spend more on specialised services for those expecting children as they approach middle age.*
More and more Britons are delaying motherhood following the rise in women enjoying well-paid careers, as well as the growing need for both parents in a couple to have an income.
...

In this excerpt, the framing of social change is constructed by various adverbs of time and quantity (*now*; *more and more*) and noun phrases and verbal constructions denoting recent change (*record*; *boom*; *trebles*; *has trebled*; *trend*; *rise*; *growing need*). Notably the article starts with many age references to women/mothers: *over 40*; *fifth decade or later*; *older*; *after their 40th birthday; approach middle age.* The plethora of age references emphasises the newsworthiness of the social statistics. The

presentation of *older women* and *mothers over 40* as co-referential establishes a lifespan category 'older' for women in this age group within the context of parenting. Chronological milestones *fifth decade or later* and *middle age* arguably 'upgrade' the elderliness of women aged over 40. The social change regarding late motherhood is formulated as a choice via an active verb construction [m]*ore and more Britons <u>are delaying</u> motherhood* (originating from *women enjoying well-paid careers*, which specifies older mothers as ones with good jobs), whilst financial necessity is also presented as an account for the trend: *the growing need for both parents to have an income*. The framing of the trend in a negative light is achieved via references to risks, legitimated by *medical experts* who in turn are activated by the trend *to warn...older women*. The source of the implied burden that older mothers place on health service resources is not clearly attributed (whose calls?), but an implicature is nevertheless created about older mothers and their need for specialised, costly services, adding a problem-orientation to the social trend. The social age of mothers over 40 thus achieves a negative stance, especially if an intertextual link is made with other 'older' people (the elderly) who are frequently discussed in the media as a strain on the health service.

The social frame in the rest of the articles was typically constructed by:

- Explicit references to 'trend': e.g. *trend for late parenthood*; *the older-dad trend*

- References to societal/lifestyle changes, often with temporal and comparative expressions linked with change: e.g. *women are torn between their careers and motherhood*; *mums these days no longer fit into any particular mould*; *60 being the new 40*; *our complicated attitude to late motherhood*; *impending fertility crisis as women delay childbearing*; *society has a new hate object* [referring to older mothers]; *older mothers are becoming more and more commonplace*; *it is a sin, it is against nature* [Elton John's proposed adoption]; *adopting foreign children has become increasingly fashionable*; *new parents getting older and older*

- Demographic statistics denoting rise in older parents and/or parental age

The *Daily Mail* article discussed above includes an insert of a specific example of late motherhood:

JUGGLING WORK AND MOTHERHOOD AT 67

THE oldest mother in Britain is still working full time and leaving her baby with a nanny a year after he was born.

Elizabeth Adeney, 67, looked tired and stressed from juggling motherhood and her career in the week her baby Jolyon celebrates his first birthday.

The wealthy divorcee works five days a week despite being well past retirement age

and employs a nanny to look after her son, who will be one tomorrow.

Mrs Adeney is managing director of plastic and textile firm Delmore Ltd in Mildenhall,

Suffolk and often leaves the office after dark.

The businesswoman, who will be 68 next month, also continued working until days

before Jolyon was born. She went back to work four weeks after giving birth.

…A source close to Mr Adeney…said the marriage foundered, as his wife who had not

been married before, became consumed with the desire to have children.

Mrs Adney, who does not have a partner or siblings, will be just short of her 80th

birthday when Jolyon becomes a teenager.

This insert is a prime example to confirm Hadfield et al.'s (2007) findings, referred to above, about media bias against older mothers. Whilst *juggling work and motherhood* could potentially invite a sympathetic reading of the protagonist's struggle, the inclusion of her chronological age 67 in the title shifts the newsworthiness onto her advanced age and indexes incongruity. Similarly, the physical and psychological consequences (*tired and stressed*) of Elizabeth Adeney's (EA) parenting role are recast as potentially avoidable, since she is represented as *wealthy* (creating an implicature of working by choice) *despite* (signalling a contrast with what follows) *being well past retirement age* – categorising her in a social age group in line

with her chronological age, but one which she chooses to reject. What emerges is a

picture of EA as a workaholic (*works five days a week*; *often leaves the office after

dark*; *continued working until days before Jolyon was born*; *went back to work four

weeks after giving birth*), whose motives for parenting might be suspect (*consumed

with the desire to have children*; the article also briefly mentions EA's use of donor eggs

sourced abroad) and who is potentially putting her son at risk in light of her short

remaining lifespan (as she *does not have a partner or siblings*; *divorcee*). The

descriptions invite a reading of EA as a selfish older mother who wishes to 'have it all'

(Shaw and Giles, 2009). The negative stance of this article could be explained by the

right-wing ideology of the newspaper (*Daily Mail*) which might favour a more

traditional timing and practice of parenting. As shown on table 2, 12 of the articles in

this frame appeared in broadsheets and these tended to offer a more balanced

coverage of the advantages and disadvantages of late parenting.

Personal frame

Within the personal frame, the articles were typically first person accounts of the

journey to late parenting, generally with a positive stance, or with the main focus on

the advantages and joys of late parenting, told by women and occasionally men,

predominantly in feature articles. Some opinion pieces offered a more balanced

coverage of potential advantages and disadvantages of late parenting from a personal angle, whereas data from the more recent press featured personal stories or foci on individuals expressing regrets of late parenting.

An example of a positively framed article on is one from *The Express* (12.7.2010, pp. 32-33, Features):

Having babies in our 40s made us better mothers; SADIE NICHOLS speaks to two women who say their age gives them the edge when it comes to child rearing

I'M MORE SECURE AND HAVE MORE PATIENCE

Jan Andersen, 50, is a writer who lives in Swindon, Wilts, with her partner Mike, 38... and their daughter Lauren, 10...

I GET annoyed when people criticise mothers who have babies when they are older. People should be judged on their parenting skills and not their age. Women who choose to delay motherhood because of their career often do so with good reason. I have seen too many women give in to pressure to get pregnant sooner than they are ready and they can end up resenting the child. You can be a great parent at 23 and a great parent at 63.

However, I had my first child when I was 22 and can say without question that I have been a far better parent in my 40s than I ever was in my 20s.

I've had life experience, I don't feel torn between career, social life and family any more and I am emotionally and financially more secure, as well as more patient.

...In general, older parents tend to be less selfish. They are not so interested in going to pubs or backpacking around the world and are less likely to see children as a burden.

A relational categorisation is created between younger and older parents (first from a personal, first person perspective, *I*, later via a membership categorisation of *older parents* and third person focus, *they*), which portrays the latter as *emotionally and financially more secure*; *more patient*; *less selfish* – characteristics associated with 'good' parenting. Older parents are represented as having established *a balance between career, social life and family* which does not cause them anxiety *any more* (implying another contrast with younger parents). The comparative forms *not so interested* and *less likely* similarly create favourable evaluations of older, as opposed to younger parents, in qualities that index 'better' parenting. This personal account echoes Shelton and Johnson's (2006) findings about older parents positioning themselves favourably vis-a-vis dominant parenting discourses to potentially transcend stigma and links with the opening sentence (*I get annoyed*...), too, which sets up a stance of the interviewee defending her in-group. A mismatch is created between personal age and social age. In over half of the articles in this frame, explicit references

were made to similar contrasts between the protagonists' personal age and their social

age, typically referring to older parents being mistaken for grandparents.

Another article about older mothers (*Eastern Daily Press*, 4.11.2011) starts with

a personal focus on the famous Susan Tollefsen (ST) and represents her evaluating

parenting as '[t]he best thing I have ever done in my life'. However, negativity in the

framing is constructed via the theme of regret:

Regrets...Britain's oldest first-time mum has a few

Susan Tollefsen was 57 when she became Britain's oldest first-time mother using a

donor egg. Now aged 62 and separated from her partner, 11 years younger, she has

just said she believes there should be an age limit of 50 for IVF....Her sadness is that of

time running out, of the likelihood that she will not see Freya grow up to have children

of her own – certainly not if little Freya waits as long as her mum did to have children.

Criticism against late parenting accrues legitimacy if even those who famously

exemplified this social trend end up having regrets. Like E Adeney discussed above, ST

is represented as single. Also, ST appears conscious of her mortality (*time running out*)

which is said to cause her *sadness*. She admits – in retrospect - to favour an age limit

for IVF, likely to be in line with the ideologies of 'appropriate' parenting chronology

promoted by the paper (again a tabloid).

Features that helped construct the personal frame in the corpus included:

- Personal reference (first or full name) or category reference (*new dad – aged 52*) in the headline or byline

- First person retrospective accounts of parenting experiences

- Extensive quotes from the protagonist; multiple third person singular pronoun references to the person focused on, in addition to first name or first name-last name references (*Janet is a loving and conscientious mum…she now concedes that she was too old to become a mother...*) or use of third person plural for inclusive membership categorisation (*we older mothers*)

- Many personal details of protagonist, such as age, occupation, relationship history, reproductive history (such a multiple attempts at IVF)

- Prominence of adjectives (positive and negative) and other evaluative expressions relating to the experience of parenting, referring to offspring or referring to the protagonist: e.g. *what I've lost in energy, I've gained in patience*; *we took great delight in our* girls; isn't *she* [older mother] *being a tad selfish*?; *Jake* [child] *is perfectly healthy*.

Risks frame

Articles in the risk frame follow a more scientific genre, referring to research in an unmitigated and factual manner. An example of this is from *The Daily Telegraph* (9.2.2010, News, p. 8):

Older mothers are more likely to have autistic child

WOMEN who put off starting a family until they are in their forties are 50 per cent more likely to have a child with autism, according to scientists.

…

When older women become pregnant the risk of miscarriage is greater, there is a higher chance of developing pre-eclampsia, a pregnancy complication, and the instance of Down's Syndrome babies is more common…[reference to researchers at University of California, Davis]…A 40-year-old mother's chance of having an autistic child was 50 per cent greater than a woman giving birth between the ages of 25 and 29, they found. The findings…concluded that the father's age was only a factor when the mother was young.

This is a typical example of this frame where the chronological age of older parents is contrasted with their biological age for optimum parenting. Various problems are highlighted in terms of their statistical probability (*more likely*; *greater*; *higher chance*; *more common*). As Budds et al. (2013) observed, women are

represented as having agency in delaying parenting (*put off*) and consequently can be blamed for taking the risks.

An article in *The Times* (27.10.2009) similarly connects higher chronological age with increased risks, in this case of Down's syndrome, the rise of which is represented in a factual style as a direct consequence of delayed parenting.

Surge in Down's pregnancies as women delay becoming mothers

The number of Down's syndrome pregnancies has risen sharply over the past 20 years, largely because of an increase in older women trying to have children, research suggests….The risk of having a baby with Down's syndrome is one in 940 for a woman aged 30. But for those aged 40, the risk rises to one in 85.

The risk frame in the corpus was mainly constructed by:

- Impersonal forms; passive voice; scientific genre markers, including prominent medical lexis
- Quotes from institutional and expert sources
- References to statistics and probabilities relating to risks; references to genetic abnormalities and disorders.

Continued parenting frame

This frame provides the clearest example of the gendering of chronological and social age (Ginn and Arber, 1995). Nine out of the 12 articles centred on fathers. Most of these appeared in the tabloid press and many focused on or at least referred to celebrities. The first example comes from *Belfast Telegraph* (29.5.2009) with the headline/byline:

IT'S OLD FATHERS' TIME

At 53, Mel Gibson has announced his girlfriend Oksana Grigorieva is expecting his eighth child. Three local men tell Kerry McKittrick about the joys of being an older dad

One of the older fathers featured, Yvyan Howard (63), a medical doctor and professor, is reported to say:

I've been through the whole thing before as I already have four grown up children from a previous marriage. It helps that you know what to expect, but this time round I find I have much more time to enjoy the whole thing. I've cut back on my work a lot in recent years, particularly travelling away from home...An older father isn't really much of a culture shock these days, in fact it's becoming increasingly more common. My wife is much younger than me, too, so there will always be a parent around for them.

The article's news peg centres round an older male celebrity's impending

fatherhood whereas the article concentrates on case studies of more local older

fathers. The framing is one of enjoyment - *joys of being an older dad*; *enjoy the whole*

thing – with the repeated generalising phrase *the whole thing* connoting previous

personal experience, as does *you know what to expect*. Late fatherhood is represented

as a growing trend (*old fathers' time*; *these days*; *increasingly more common*), the

attitudes to which are improving ([not] *really much of a culture shock*). Unlike the older

mothers exemplified above, this protagonist is not expressing concerns about his

mortality as the age of his wife is predicted to guarantee that *there will always be a*

parent around. An established secure financial and career status appears to enable this

older father to *cut back on* [his] *work a lot* – in order to enjoy parenting. He is

projecting a 'good' parent image by references to *hav*[ing]...*time* and not *travelling*

away from home, in contrast to his younger self (*this time round*), further contributing

to the positive framing of his late parenting experience.

An example of a celebrity older father is a short news item in *Irish News*

(30.12.2009, p.3):

Van the Man becomes a father again aged 64

...At 64 the musician won't be the most sprightly father at the school gates but he

won't be the only one with a free bus pass either. Older dads do not raise eyebrows in

the same way older mums tend to and silver-haired celebrity fathers are nothing out of

the ordinary.

(the article continues to list various older celebrity fathers, giving their ages at late

fatherhood).

The age identification via chronological age in the title is complemented by

metaphorical references to a *free bus pass* (available in the UK to people over 60), and

to physicality and appearance connoting older age ([not] *the most sprightly; silver-*

haired). Late fatherhood is normalised (*do not raise eyebrows; nothing out of the*

ordinary) and via the exemplification of many other older male celebrity fathers.

This frame in the corpus was constructed by:

- Explicit age references (to both older fathers and their younger wives)

- Evaluations of protagonists' age identities, often positive: e.g. *no signs of*
  slowing down; *sly old dog*; *virile*, but also some negative: *old enough to collect a*
  pension; *ridiculous*

- References to reproductive history and previous relationships; references to
  enjoyment of late parenting.

IVF/technology enabled parenting

Lastly, the IVF/technology enabled parenting frame is also science-focused but instead of centring on risks, the articles tend to be about the assisted reproductive techniques themselves, with older parents positioned as beneficiaries. For example, a front page news item in *The Daily Telegraph* (19.10.2009, p. 1):

Egg screening breakthrough can double IVF success rate

TENS of thousands of women struggling to have children will be given hope by a new technique which can double the chance of IVF success....Doctors believe that the test could particularly help older women, whose embryos generally contain more abnormalities.

The IVF related technique is represented as giving *struggling* (potential) older parents *hope* with an increased *chance of ...success*. The *struggle* connotes the challenges that older women's chronological age pose to their biological and physiological age, but also the consequences of dealing with infertility. Parenting itself is constructed as desirable and achievable, even for older women, who – aided by scientific discoveries – might defy nature. A more extreme example of this is a foreign news item in *The Independent* (10.12.2008, p. 26):

The 70-year-old parents – and the mother of all rows;

Ethical questions raised as IVF gives pair first child after 55 years of trying

FOR MORE than half a century, Rajo Devi and her husband dreamt of having a child...Then last year, with both aged 70 and married for 55 years, Mrs Devi and her husband, Bala Ram, learnt through neighbours...about a 58-year-old woman who had given birth to twins after in vitro fertilisation treatment. They decided they too would do the same....the event will trigger fresh debate about the wisdom of giving birth at such an advanced age.

....[in India] Infertility is no longer a social taboo *or a divine curse. It can be treated scientifically.*

The news value of unexpecteness and superlativeness is realised via the protagonists' age. Again, they are the beneficiaries of IVF (as evident in the title via the verb *gives*). However, although IVF is represented as helping eradicate the *social taboo* of infertility and thus offering not just biological but also social benefits, the ethical dilemmas (*mother of all rows; fresh debate about the wisdom*) surrounding the incongruity of the particular chronological, biological and physical age and the demands of parenting in this context contribute to lessen any positive framing of this text.

These features help construct this frame in the corpus:

- Scientific and medical lexis and register; references to e.g. *technique*; *method*; *IVF treatment*; *tests*; *clinic*. Also *ethics*.

- Lexis of recency: *new*; *breakthrough*; *landmark*

- References to the benefits of the technique; descriptions of the technique; quotes from medical experts

- Statistics of success rates.

Conclusion

This study has shown how late parenting is represented in news discourse as a challenging concept in various ways, in contrast to 'normative' parenting. Each of the five main frames discussed above offers a different orientation to parenting at an older age. These framings both reflect and constitute different perspectives to ageing more generally and these can also be linked with social gerontological literature on different approaches to ageing (e.g. Bond et al., 2007).

In the social change frame, older parents are presented as a growing trend in society and the perspective on ageing can be construed as sociological. While advantages of older parenting are sometimes mentioned, and the changing landscape of especially female career structures are offered as valid reasons for delaying parenting, the overall stance in the data tends to frame older parenting as both

demographically and morally undesirable, particularly in the tabloid press. The social

age of the parents is foregrounded. The personal frame offers a personal perspective

on age and ageing which is often more positively slanted but which also constructs

identity dilemmas: the personal age comes into conflict with social age here. The

specific context of representation (textual co-text) is important to acknowledge:

articles with a personal frame tend to appear as feature articles and sometimes in

sections devoted to families and/or women. This is significant in terms of the positive

representations in the coverage, as the readership is more selective and arguably

might more likely consist of older parents themselves (so addressing an in-group

audience) or readers sympathetic to late parenting. This is in contrast to the risk frame,

for example, associated with short news items.

The risks frame constructs a biological perspective on ageing in which older

parents are represented as (potentially) taking deliberate risks, which need to be

outweighed against the desire to parent. Parents' chronological age comes into conflict

with or is assessed in relation to their biological age. Continued/not first time

parenting frame, in turn, constructs older parents in gendered ways – echoing Sontag's

(1979) famous concept of the 'double standard of ageing' - representing older fathers

as more 'acceptable' or unmarked (according to the 'natural order') and generally

positively, albeit at times with humorous and ageist undertones. Older fathers, unlike

older mothers, arguably do not as clearly challenge normative expectations about the timing of parenting (in this cultural context) – unless they are exceptionally old. Subjective and personal age come into play in personal accounts in reports on older fathers (especially celebrities) 'doing well for their age'. IVF/ technology enabled parenting frame, on the other hand, offers a biomedical perspective on ageing, foregrounding biological and physiological age in comparison to chronological age, in which age-related limitations of declined fertility can be overcome and older parents emerge as defying nature and as triumph for science. This poses ethical challenges which are sometimes explicitly addressed in the texts.

These perspectives and challenges are summarised in table 3.

Table 3: Linking frames and perspectives on ageing and late parenting

Frame / perspective on ageing	Age focus	Orientation to older parents (OPs)	Challenge to normative parenting
Social change frame / Sociological perspective	Social age	OPs a growing trend	Social / moral challenges
Personal frame / Personal perspective	Personal vs. social age	OPs achieved fulfilment	Identity challenges
Risks frame / Biological perspective	Chronological age vs. biological age	OPs take deliberate risks	Age-based biological challenges
Continued parenting frame / Gendered perspective	Subjective; personal age	Older fathers following natural order	Confirming normative script (gender relations)
IVF enabled parenting frame / Biomedical perspective	Chronological age; Biological age; physiological age	OPs defying nature	Ethical challenges

From a critical discourse perspective, what is left unexplicit or unsaid in texts is also an important consideration, pointing to issues which might be taken for granted or considered ideologically 'common sense' (in the constitution of 'good' parenting, for example). From a constructionist perspective, there is always interaction between media content and its consumers. Readers need to fill in the gaps in frame packaging and '[f]rames contribute to the interpretation and evaluative definition of the social world' (Van Gorp, 2007: 61). The cultural aspect of framing needs to be acknowledged here; the interpretation of the frames relies on readers' sharing a repertoire of frames in a particular culture. These consist of cultural schema and scripts for normative, unmarked parenting and lifespan development, from which late parenting can be seen to deviate. The framing process, then, is arguably not only cognitive, but also linked with familiar *cultural* frames about ideal parenting. Older parents in these texts are at times seen to represent 'good' parenting - through their experience, emotional stability, dedication and financial security, for example. But they mainly represent 'bad' or less desirable parenting or parents – through representations of, for example, being selfish, career oriented, disrupting the normative lifespan developmental and parenting script (especially postmenopausal mothers, but also older fathers being mistaken for grandfathers), and via reduced life expectancy and increased risks to the child.

Whereas MFA concentrates on news influence and can be a useful method in approaching news framing, interaction between media consumers and media texts is also an important aspect in the analysis of news framing. That interaction relies on culturally shared notions of, in this case, parenting and the lifespan, which, in turn, consist of different (at times competing) perspectives on ageing.

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