

Motherhood on ice? A media framing analysis of older mothers in the UK news

Rachel L. Shaw^a and David C. Giles^{b*}

^a*School of Life and Health Sciences, Aston University, Birmingham, B4 7ET, UK;* ^b*Institute for Health Research, Lancaster University, Bailrigg, Lancaster, LA1 4YT, UK*

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Changing gender roles and increased sexual and economic freedom have created opportunities for women to give birth relatively late in life. However, stigma and misplaced fears about physical capacity are often reported as sources of anxiety among older, and *in vitro* fertilisation-induced mothers. In this study, we apply a specially adapted method for analysing news media content to a week's selection of material in the British media following the dissemination of research at an international medical conference. Our findings suggest, despite some positive commentaries, that much negative discourse is circulated by the media about older mothers, from implied claims of selfishness (older mothers as 'delaying' conception) to violations of the 'natural order'. These latter claims reflect the long-standing ambivalence by the media generally towards scientific advancement, but they also reveal continuing resistance towards unorthodox lifestyles.

Keywords: motherhood; *in vitro* fertilisation; ageing; parenting; media; discourse

Introduction

Changing gender roles and increased sexual and economic freedom mean that women now have more control over their destinies than at any point in recent history. As a result, young women are no longer restricted to the traditional roles of wife and mother but are able to obtain an education, contribute to the workforce and become independent in their own right. Often these life goals outweigh the desire to become a mother and therefore frequently come first (McAllistair & Clarke, 1998). Consequently, many women are older, in their late twenties or early thirties, before they even begin to consider whether to have children. Nevertheless, dominant ideology promotes 'normative' development, which means that older mothers go beyond our notion of the 'idealised' mother (Sevón, 2006; Shelton & Johnson, 2006). The concept of an 'older mother', however, is not clear and the notion of identifying an 'ideal' age to become a mother may be too crass. Nevertheless, this has to some extent been culturally negotiated. Government targets to reduce teenage pregnancy dictate what is considered 'too young' in Western society (Social Exclusion Report, 1999) and biology confirms that post-menopausal women cannot naturally conceive and become mothers. An 'older mother', therefore, could be anywhere between these two markers. Beyond that, it is difficult, and probably unhelpful, to make any clear

*Corresponding author. Email: d.c.giles@lancaster.ac.uk

statement about how old/older she is. This article explores just one of the important cultural mechanisms, by which representations are circulated about age and motherhood – the news media – and how research on older mothers is ‘framed’ in a way that contributes to beliefs and talk about older mothers in society.

Recent decades have seen a gradual rise in the age at which women give birth to their first child (Carolan, 2005; Wu & Macneill, 2002). In 2004, the fertility rate of women aged 30–34 overtook that of women aged 25–29 for the first time in the UK, and the average age of first-time mothers rose to over 27 (Office for National Statistics, 2005). A similar picture is emerging across Europe, for example, in Spain, the average age of first-time mothers rose above 30 for the first time in the 1990s (Bosch, 1998) and fertility rates are in decline (Office for National Statistics, 2005). While improvements in health care and medical science, and increased success rates of assisted reproductive technology, particularly *in vitro* fertilisation (IVF), could be held directly responsible for these developments, as stated earlier, social and lifestyle factors are certainly important (Mirowsky & Ross, 2002). Prior to the Second World War there was nothing unusual about childbirth at ages beyond 40, and in some societies (albeit largely because of economic difficulties and high infant mortality) women continued to have children well into their forties and beyond (Berryman, 1991).

There has been some concern within the scientific and medical communities about the potential health risks associated with giving birth at older ages, among others increased risk of breast cancer (Kroman et al., 1998), stress (Reece, 1995), Down syndrome (Crane & Morris, 2006), hypertension, prolonged labour, and perinatal mortality (Gosden & Rutherford, 1995). Medical advice literature and other popular literature have tended to advise against older motherhood on social grounds as much as health risks; for instance, one British Medical Association manual warned of “being taken for granny at the school gate” (Berryman, 1991, p. 109).

On the contrary, several studies that have been conducted on older mothers’ experiences of pregnancy and childbirth have produced positive findings. Compared to younger mothers, they tend to be better prepared (Carolan, 2005; Shelton & Johnson, 2006), more committed to the “parenting experience” (Ragozin et al., 1982), less likely to suffer from post-natal depression (Carolan, 2005), and in the case of mothers who received IVF treatment at least, much less likely to take childbirth for granted, even after the birth itself (McMahon, Tennant, Ungerer, & Saunders, 1999). As with the literature on health risk, however, some of these findings have been contested (e.g. Stowe & Nemeroff, 1995, found higher rates of post-natal depression in older mothers). Despite these potential advantages of having children later in life, older mothers must still face the stigma of unconventional motherhood – post-menopausal pregnancy in particular constitutes a threat to our notion of the ‘perfect mother’ (Letherby, 1999). While we recognise the difficulty of identifying what constitutes an ‘older mother’, it is fair to conclude that women over 50 and 60 do not figure in our cultural constructions of ‘typical’ new mothers.

While several studies have identified positive aspects of older motherhood, most have tended to find high levels of anxiety. This is not surprising in cases of IVF-assisted pregnancies, where McMahon et al. (1999) found that women often braced themselves for possible failure and subsequent disappointment, although much of the anxiety found in other studies can be attributed to concerns about the social appropriateness of adopting the motherhood identity. Berryman and Windridge (1991), cited in Berryman (1991) reported that older mothers experienced much community prejudice, including shock and disgust, even from family and friends. Health professionals can also contribute to high anxiety by treating older mothers as “special cases”, and labelling them as “difficult” and “needy” (Carolan, 2005, p. 765). Specific anxieties reported in older mothers include

concerns about “selfishness” (Shelton & Johnson, 2006), worries about energy levels and coping ability (Dobrzykowski & Stern, 2003), and, to a lesser extent, fears about mortality and missing out on seeing their children grow up (Carolan, 2005).

One potential source of social anxiety around older motherhood is the representation of older mothers in the media. Some authors have argued that motherhood *per se* tends to be idealised in the media and in much of the psychological literature (Choi, Henshaw, Baker, & Tree, 2005; Shelton & Johnson, 2006). These authors call for a broader range of representations of motherhood to be available, that reflects the diversity of maternal experience, particularly the ambivalence of mothers towards the parenting role, thereby lessening the pressure felt by so many to be “good mothers” that contributes to anxiety particularly among older mothers.

There has been increasing interest in the influence of the media on health beliefs and behaviour in recent years. Researchers have explored the role that media play in helping to shape public opinion about health through news broadcasts and print media (Thorson, 2006), television documentary (Hight & Coleborne, 2006), advertising (Cherrington, Chamberlain, & Grixti, 2006), soap opera (Howe, Owen-Smith, & Richardson, 2002; Verma, Adams, & White, 2007), and magazines (Lyons, Dalton, & Hoy, 2006). These studies have drawn on a variety of theoretical perspectives and used different research methods; within the current climate of increased uptake of qualitative methods, it is perhaps timely to introduce a systematic means of exploring media representations derived from communication theory.

In this article, we present the results of a study carried out using media framing analysis, an adaptation for psychologists of existing methods used in communication and other social sciences to study the manner, in which media “frame” topics in ways that direct the audience’s attention to certain features of the stories, or certain interpretations, and away from other alternative interpretations. While media framing has been applied for many years in communication research, there is still some disagreement over its application as a research tool, and it still lacks a coherent methodology (Scheufele, 2004). We believe that the literature would benefit from a systematic methodology that could act as a broad framework for analyses of this type of data, and might serve to encourage further, more detailed and thorough research on media materials in psychology and other social sciences. Indeed, in a study of the framing of mental health issues in the US media (Sieff, 2003), the author concluded by saying that future research on the topic required “a systematic analysis of framing functions, structures and elements used in the media to describe mental illnesses” (p. 266).

Our procedure for studying media framing draws on a number of existing analytical techniques, including narrative analysis (Crossley, 2000; Murray, 2003) and membership categorisation analysis (MCA) (Baker, 2004). Our analysis is organised into five discrete stages, which examine the framing process from a number of different angles. The data consist of news reports and feature articles that were collected at the end of a week, in which age and motherhood had featured widely in the UK news media following an international conference on reproductive medicine.

Method

Materials

News articles for the week 23–27 October 2006 were obtained from the LexisNexis database of UK media. Several sets of search terms (e.g. mothers, older) were entered and we identified 23 articles that were relevant to the broad topic. Since the conference was

held in the United States, we expected to find relevant coverage in the US media, but a search of the online archives of the two leading national dailies (the New York Times and Washington Post) was unsuccessful; we also checked some leading European newspapers with similar results. Finally, we searched the online news archives of UK television channels; only two articles could be identified from these, both from bbc.co.uk.

The full set of 25 articles can be summarised thematically across the week as follows:

Monday 23 October. Eight news stories reporting the findings of a study (henceforth referred to as study no. 1), presented at the annual conference of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine (ASRM), exploring the physical and mental health of women who had given birth at 50 or later.

Tuesday 24 October. Five articles following from Monday's reports, either commentary pieces or features (e.g. the Daily Express tracked down a woman named Patti Farrant, variously described as "Britain's oldest mother", who had a child earlier in the year at the age of 62 and whose case had been widely reported in the UK media).

Wednesday 25 October. Thirteen articles; two features following from Monday's reports and 11 news stories reporting a second study (study no. 2) from the ASRM conference that found a negative correlation between mothers' age at conception and their daughters' chances of successful fertility treatment.

Thursday 26 October. One commentary, a summary of previous reports.

Analytical procedure

Media framing analysis progressed in five stages.

Identifying the story

This began with a search for the 'news peg', or triggering event (Cooper & Yukimura, 2002), which enabled us to identify the source of the set of articles concerning age and motherhood. In most of Monday's and Wednesday's news reports the source was clearly detailed as the ASRM conference, although the feature articles on Tuesday and Wednesday were more likely to refer in general terms to 'research published this week' or 'latest research'. Also, a secondary news peg could be identified in many of the Monday articles. This related to a statement by Lord Harries, chairman of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (variously referred to as "the government's fertility watchdog") criticising the NHS "ceiling" of 39 as the maximum age for fertility treatment.

Identifying character

This stage required taking a narrative analytical approach by identifying key 'dramatis personae' in the story or stories and using this to establish agency (literally, who is doing what to whom?) (Entman, 1991). In the present study, this process mainly concerned key 'witnesses' cited as evidence for the author's argument: typically, statements by academics and other fertility experts or case studies – particularly in feature articles – of older mothers.

Narrative form and reader identification

Once the characters and sources have been identified, the next stage involved analysis of the narrative forms used to present the story to the audience. One of the tasks at this stage

is to suggest, which characters in the story the audience is invited to identify with. This can be done by examining framing devices such as accompanying headlines, pictures and captions, or by authors' choice of supporting material. For example, in the Daily Express study of Patti Farrant's home town of Lewes, the article features a number of quotations from various local residents expressing mild disapproval of their neighbour: here the audience is clearly expected to be on their side.

Analysis of language categories

This stage involves a detailed examination of the language used to describe key characters and events in the story. It can draw on content analysis by counting instances of specific terms, or in our case, MCA, which we used to identify the 'central categories' that define the structure of the text (Baker, 2004), thus informing the debates around age and motherhood.

Generalisation

The final stage of the analysis attempts to place the story in a wider social and cultural context by examining references to broader debates, long-standing stories and previous media coverage. For example, many of the articles in our dataset referred to the "trend" towards older motherhood, and – particularly in relation to study no. 2 – speculated about the possible future outcome of increasing numbers of older mothers (e.g. "we could see", "we are likely to see"), often using highly emotive language ("frightening", etc).

Although, discrete during the initial analytical process, these stages are likely to be interrelated in the reporting of findings. The stages give structure to the analytical process in order to enable an in-depth exploration of the data. During these initial stages, the analyst was looking for different functions or structures within the text, outlined above. Once these five stages are complete, the goal of the analysis is to identify themes, which represent the ways in which these functions or structures have worked to frame the story (or stories). It is likely therefore that the themes presented will cross over the different functions identified. To summarise, phase 1 of the analysis involves the identification of functions or structures in the text, which help to frame the story; phase 2 involves interpretative work to identify themes (and specific data extracts), which represent the meanings conveyed in the text in order to illustrate how these structures have framed the story.

Results and discussion

Overview

Our analysis identified a variety of frames created for the topic of age and motherhood in this particular week's news output. We attempted to classify each story as either positive (in relation to older mothers generally) or negative by examining each of the different aspects of framing: for example, the role of 'experts' and case studies, the wording of headlines, the language categorisation and the broader generalisation. Overall, this produced a slight predominance of negative stories (12, compared to nine positive and six neutral ones). However, even some of the positive stories carried a negative subtext: for example, Times feature that consisted of a broadly positive first-person account of older motherhood was full of caveats (e.g. "my goodness, though, it was tough"), as if to ward off any thoughts readers might have of trying it out for themselves. Appendix contains

a table of the complete set of articles along with our evaluation of the position, or stance, of each story towards older mothers.

In the remainder of this section, we have chosen to focus on a number of dominant themes, which we believe to be central to the framing of age and motherhood in our dataset.

“Motherhood on ice”

A large number of articles, particularly news reports, referred to older mothers as “delaying” or “postponing” motherhood, even putting it “on ice”. This construction carries two implications. The first is that motherhood is inevitable or even obligatory for women – it is not simply a matter of if, only when. The second is that there is an ‘optimum age’ for motherhood, a belief that potentially marginalises younger as well as older mothers (Phoenix, 1991). This was articulated in one article by a fertility expert as “(choosing) not to have children at the peak of reproductive life” (Times, Wed). From this analysis of the language categories used (stage 4), we have identified the prominence of the notion of ‘delayed motherhood’ in these media extracts, and therefore confirm the presence of a negative story (stage 1). This language attributes agency to women and identifies the ‘older mother’ as a central character. This also works to apportion blame to these women for defaulting on society’s assumed expectation that all women want to and do have children.

The use of “delay” was mostly casual, but consistent with other arguments put forward by fertility experts and feature writers who invoked irresponsibility and selfishness as characteristics of older mothers. This was particularly pertinent in relation to study no. 2, where the reader was often invited to identify, not with the mother, but with the projected future daughter (whom the older mother was, ostensibly, putting at risk of infertility). This inference could be gleaned from the headline alone, e.g. “Girls of older mums face infertility risk” (Daily Express, Wed), or from more judgemental statements, such as “condemning their daughters to infertility” (Daily Mail, Wed).

It seems clear that much of the disapproval surrounding delayed motherhood stems from the associated concern that modern women are “choosing” to pursue education and develop a career instead of having children at the optimum age (typically, the twenties). This was illustrated by various references to older mothers as “self-indulgent and rather vain” (Guardian, Wed), “wrong and selfish” (Sun,¹ Tue), and to modern women as wishing “to have it all” (several sources). These examples of language use (stage 4) illustrate how the empowerment women may feel through having a choice is immediately withdrawn through the moralised construction of choosing not to have children at the optimum age as ‘selfish’. Again this is about women not fulfilling their destiny as mothers. The rhetorical effect of this language use is that it conjures out-dated and stereotyped notions of gender roles and in doing so automatically subsumes the decades of progressive movements towards equality that we have witnessed in Western culture.

The issue of ‘optimum age’ is brought up by various fertility experts in the news stories, notably a British academic, Professor Bill Ledger, who has quoted on bbc.co.uk (Wed) as recommending the peak age for fertility for women as “between 20 and 35 years”. Ironically, the decline in daughters’ fertility reported in study no. 2 is related to mothering ages between 26 and 29, leaving only six years as optimum. The choice of the BBC to highlight the Ledger quote is consistent with the website’s construction of a highly negative frame for this story (stage 1); indeed the headline ‘Older eggs pass on fertility risk’ manages

to erase even the mother herself from the story. The depersonalisation of the woman as a central character (stage 2) in this story, reduces her to a defective egg factory that could potentially jeopardise future generations because of misuse, that is, because the woman conceived outside the window of opportunity.

On the other side of the debate, a small number of articles took an individualistic standpoint and focused on the fertility decision as a “right”: “the decision to seek treatment is one (older mothers) alone can take” (Independent, Wed). Only The Guardian (Tue) adopted a gendered perspective, citing the apparently positive portrayal of late fatherhood (albeit with celebrities as examples), in order to defend older mothers from criticism. Indeed, the general lack of a male perspective in these media portrayals implies their absence from the decision to have children and whether the process of conception progresses in a normalised way.

Older mothers as “unnatural”

One of the most consistent themes in the dataset concerns an invocation of the “natural” and associated positive attributes. The idea of “the natural order” was introduced by a number of authors who took a negative stance on older mothers, gently chiding attempts to “cheat time” (in one case, by indulging in such ‘unnatural’ activities as taking “country walks” and “eating muesli”). These authors spoke of “physical destiny”, “bald biological facts”, and “biological clocks” lying in wait to take their revenge on people foolish enough to try and “bend nature to their will” (Daily Telegraph, Wed). This is an example of the media drawing upon an existing cultural narrative – to have children is natural (stage 3). Narrative works as a structure, which contextualises events and enables us to make sense of them. When that narrative structure is missing, the context is not apparent and making sense of the event becomes more difficult or sometimes impossible. In this case, by invoking the narrative of nature these texts are suggesting that anything outside of this ‘comfort zone’ is unnatural and therefore incomprehensible.

Even where nature was not explicitly mentioned, a number of articles managed to construct older motherhood – and older parenting in general – as freakish. This was most evident in the Tuesday Express that feature on Patti Farrant, who had been the subject of extensive media coverage earlier in the year after giving birth at the age of 62. The reporter visited Lewes, the Farrants’ home town, and – evidently unable to secure an interview with Farrant herself – interviewed a selection of local residents, including the owner of a gift shop and a waitress in an organic café that the Farrants were said to frequent. The waitress described the couple as “incredibly old” (at 62 and 60) and that Farrant breastfeeding her son was “a sight I’ll never forget”. Throughout the article, pejorative statements were balanced with grudgingly encouraging ones (“of course, I wish them all the best, but . . .”). This example in particular, offers the perfect opportunity to draw upon the taboo subject of post-menopausal pregnancy. In this example Farrant committed two ‘cultural crimes’ – she conceived postmenopause (or post the average menopausal age) and then she also breastfed. Again this is an example of breaking the boundaries of normative development. Just as breastfeeding toddlers has been constructed as taboo, here an older woman breastfeeding her infant is powerfully framed as an unnatural act.

While the Express was the only paper to focus specifically on Patti Farrant (referred to in many articles by her previous married name – and professional identity – Patricia Rashbrook), numerous papers carried her photograph to accompany Monday’s reports of study no. 1, and in almost all of these articles she was referred to as “Britain’s Oldest

Mother” – somewhat like an anti-heroine (stage 2). One article referred to a previous holder of this particular title, while another featured the world’s oldest mother, effectively reducing the practice of late motherhood to a global contest.

Even where articles were taking a more gently sceptical approach to the subject, the concerns about older mothers were often expressed in a normative context: fertility expert Bill Ledger again quoted as claiming that their children would fail to “have a good quality of life if its parents are older than its friend’s grandparents” (Times, Mon). Three of the articles conjured up the same illustration (also cited by Berryman, 1991) of the older mother being “mistaken for granny at the school gate”, suggesting how pervasive a specific image can be on public consciousness. This again makes use of the natural narrative, but it also invokes the cruelty of children teasing in the playground. Not only older mothers are constructed as unnatural, they are also setting themselves up to be humiliated in time honoured fashion by their peers.

Motherhood: Drudgery or fun?

Allied to the notion of older mothers as selfish, a number of the more negative articles referred to older motherhood as “fun”, “enjoyment”, and so on. “Right now Patricia Rashbrook . . . is probably having a lovely time” playing with her son, claimed the Daily Telegraph (Wed). In keeping with the idea of egg freezing as a “lifestyle choice” (Daily Mail, Mon), and older mothers as “self-indulgent” (Guardian, Wed), this construction likens the experience of motherhood to a leisure activity or home entertainment, rather like acquiring a new pet or electronic gadget. This links back to the idea of Patricia Rashbrook, or Patty Farrant, as an anti-heroine (stage 2); it is as if she has stolen these experiences of happiness, which any other mother could legitimately enjoy, because she was unworthy of them. This particular older mother has been cast as a scapegoat to demonstrate the immorality of ageing motherhood in contemporary society (stage 5).

This is a stark contrast to many of the warnings issued about motherhood in other parts of the dataset: “a life of nappy-changing and night after sleepless night” (Daily Express, Tue), “the broken nights, the struggles with the pushchair” (Guardian, Tue), “tiring and relentless . . . labour intensive” (Sun, Tue). To some extent, the fact that these conflicting accounts sit side by side, even within the same articles, reflects an ambivalent attitude towards motherhood itself; as Shelton and Johnson (2006) argue, the dominant cultural image of the “good mother” creates unnecessary pressure, and more ambivalent representations are needed to reflect lived experience. Since Oakley’s (1979) landmark study exposing the stress, isolation and economic dependence of full-time motherhood, social scientists have been aware that motherhood does not live up to the idyll, it was portrayed to be in the 1950s. Further work since has highlighted maternal ambivalence and to some extent legitimised negative accounts of mothering and the adoption of a ‘mother identity’ (Hollway & Featherstone, 1997; Parker, 1995). The framing of these texts however does not corroborate this somewhat liberating idea that it is okay not to enjoy all aspects of motherhood. Instead, this ambivalence is used rhetorically by the authors of these pieces, dwelling on the positive aspects of motherhood in order to chastise existing older mothers, and on the negative aspects in the hope of scaring off potential older mothers.

Another rhetorical effect, in keeping with the narrative of older mothers as unnatural, is to construct motherhood as a chore when it occurs at the “optimum age” and a pleasure when it comes as a result of cheating time and perverting the natural order. This ties

together the two previous themes in our analysis, in presenting older motherhood as a luxury and a privilege, in contrast to “optimum age” motherhood, which is more like a duty. This is most evident in the Sun article (Tue), which is unusual in the dataset because of its use of working-class case studies, thereby adding another dimension to the idea of late motherhood as a middle-class option (even broadsheets like The Times emphasise the middle-class aspects of their older mother case studies). This is an example of generalisation (stage 5), where stories are framed within their wider socio-economic and political contexts for further discursive effect. In general, the articles in the sample appear to use class, a contentious and emotive construct, to further the ‘othering’ process of older mothers. Through searching for distinctive, isolated cases of framing (or ‘deviant cases’) in this way it is possible to establish whether there are multiple frames co-existing in the media coverage or whether one particular frame dominates. Like in other qualitative analyses, this also demands a systematic approach to the analysis in order to produce a valid and trustworthy account.

Ambivalence towards science

Just as motherhood is constructed differently in order to better serve the author’s rhetorical intentions, science too is used for rhetorical ends. However, it is important to distinguish articles by designated science writers – here, typically news stories – from those written by non-specialists, such as editorials and features. Most of the news stories in our dataset were written by the science, health, or medical editor of their respective newspapers, and we might expect such individuals to have a largely positive attitude towards science, privileging scientists’ views above lay accounts.

Scientists are quoted extensively as the authors of research (of studies no. 1 and 2), and also as expert commentators (such as Professor Bill Ledger); as such they represent a second *dramatis personae* set against the anti-heroine of the older mother (stage 2). Nevertheless, there at the same time, in the majority of articles, an implicit critique of science in its broader sense, which signifies a more generalised narrative of suspicion (stage 3). Fertility treatment, with its egg-freezing, time-cheating tricks, is cast in a Frankenstein role, particularly with regard to the future: even the study authors are presented as doom-mongers, describing findings in terms such as “frightening” and “alarming”, predicting an expected “surge” of older mothers in years to come (several articles), and even making sinister comments about “subtle things going on” (Bill Ledger, quoted on www.bbc.co.uk, Wed). These examples help to illustrate how the combination of particular language categories or word usage (stage 4) can work alongside the effect of evoking an overarching narrative of suspicion about science (stage 3) to strengthen the power of the framing process.

The reverse of the Frankenstein position, however, casts science in a heroic light, as salvation. This is particularly true in a case study presented in the Daily Mail (Wed) of Pat Matlay, who gave birth following IVF treatment in her fifties. (On this occasion, her case is warranted – as far as the author is concerned – because she had conceived a daughter at the “optimum age” who subsequently died). In this story, fertility treatment is presented as a knight in shining armour: the narrative is structured like a folk tale or fairy story, with a tragic early event, a specific low point (“that rainy night when the police were standing on my doorstep”) and a turning point (reading a magazine article that “was to change her life”), followed by archetypal happy ending (“in August... baby Stephanie... weighing... as soon as I held her in my arms”, and so on). This illustrates

the use of classic myth formulae in news articles (stage 3) alongside narrative devices that actively work to create a fantasy world where, even in the face of adversity, dreams come true (“that rainy night...”, “...I held her in my arms”). As with many accounts from women who had assisted conceptions (McMahon et al., 1999), a sense of good fortune prevails; despite the broadly positive tone of the article, the sub-text is that Matlay is essentially lucky.

Science writers have been criticised by health professionals for sensationalising stories and not presenting a more rounded perspective (Entwistle, 1995). This may be true in certain cases, but there was enormous variation in the positions of science writers in our dataset. In terms of sheer coverage, the articles in our dataset varied widely in the amount of space devoted to the stories (mean length in words = 665.2, $SD = 423.6$) and in the selection of experts consulted. Some of the information was repeated in almost all the stories, suggesting that this material was taken directly from a press release, but there were slight, though notable, variations in some of the expert quotes. For example, Peter Nagy, author of study no. 2, was quoted in a strongly negative report in *The Times* (Wed) saying “we are likely to see more fertility problems”, while in a more balanced article in *The Guardian* (Wed) the quote was toned down to “we *might* see more fertility problems” (our italics).

Interestingly, the length of the report was unrelated to the position of the author ($\chi^2(2) = 1.39$, $p = 0.5$). Some of the shortest reports used cautious language; for example, Wednesday’s *Daily Telegraph* reports that Peter Nagy “speculated” about the genetic transmission of infertility, and its 200 words contained the quote “this study involved women having fertility treatment, but it’s probably the same for the general population. It is frightening.” Likewise, some reports of study no. 1 carried caveats from its authors, such as, “it is limited and of small size” (*Independent*, Mon). Again, these disclaimers were used even in supportive pieces, providing some evidence that science reporters are aiming, where possible, for objectivity.

Historical specificity: The “indulgent generation”

Our final theme concerns the way that many authors generalised (stage 5) the story in historical terms, specifically as a quirk of a particular generation. There has been a suggestion in the UK (and other, particularly French) media in recent years that Western society is now “paying the price” for 1960s “liberalism” – notably in areas such as promiscuity and civil rights discourse. Previously, radical feminists had argued that women’s ability to bear children was the cause of their oppression and that women who dwelt on their desire to have children – or indeed defied the natural order by having children late – were being self-indulgent (Firestone, 1971 cited by Letherby, 1994). These long-standing issues are implicitly raised again in much of the pejorative coverage of age and motherhood. Specifically, older mothers are repeatedly constructed as the feckless representatives of “a generation of women determined to bend nature to their will” (*Daily Telegraph*, Wed), who “want to have it all” (*Daily Mail*, Wed), even being described by fertility expert Lord Winston as “a social problem” (*Daily Mail*, Wed). When investigating these mechanisms for generalisation, the absence of men is striking. Despite concerns about a generation and the impact of liberalism, essentially a social movement, this particular instance of framing clearly attributes blame to the women of that generation, and perhaps even more explicitly, to feminist women. Again, we return to the notion of the ageing mother as selfish because she has abandoned her predetermined sex-role stereotype.

The idea that the trend towards later birth is generation-specific goes against the “fertility time bomb” predictions of experts who see it as a continual process driven by technology rather than ideology. But the use of headlines and other devices to encourage identification with future generations carries the message that it is the mothers themselves who should be held responsible for any general decline in fertility. The unborn daughter, it implies, will (in accordance with nature’s plan) want to have children at the optimum age and will be denied, as the *Guardian* (Wed) puts it, “simply because” her mother was too old.

In this way, discourse around “the indulgent generation” links up with that of “the natural order”, suggesting that the 1960s generation, for defying the laws of nature with family planning and scientific trickery, will ultimately be judged and condemned by its offspring.

Conclusion

It may appear that our analysis of this media material is biased towards the negative. As stated earlier, over half of the articles took a negative, or cautiously neutral position towards older mothers, but there was a sizeable minority of positive positions, and some papers clearly took the trouble to achieve a fair balance. The *Sun* (Tue) presented the case from both sides of the argument; The *Independent* (Thur), framed the topic as a debate, weighing up pros and cons in a summary largely derived from previous media reports. Other articles presented the older mother’s perspective, if sometimes grudgingly (“after all, it’s their decision”), even describing study no. 2 as a “blow” (*Independent*, Wed) – science impeding, rather than dictating, social progress.

However, our focus has been on negative framing here because we were interested in the media’s potential contribution to anxiety in expectant older mothers, and their circulation of negative discourses around the topic. We found these in abundance, often with surprising force. The repeated pervasive images, particularly the older mother waiting at the school gates, and being shunned by younger “yummy mummies” reflect the fears of many older mothers as articulated in the research literature. The speed with which Monday’s reports on positive aspects of older mothering turned into doom-laden commentaries on the following days about an “indulgent” generation suggests that there are plenty of columnists and leader writers waiting for any excuse to launch an attack on what they see as 1960s values. At the same time, there are encouraging signs that science writers in particular are taking the trouble to include as many study details as space permits.

As with any new method, we expect media framing analysis to evolve as it is applied to new and varied forms of media coverage of different health and social issues. In health psychology, in particular, we can see a wide ranging applicability for media framing analysis because the media are becoming much more ingrained in our methods for seeking health information, social support and also in establishing ‘virtual communities’, for example, for people with a particular chronic condition such as irritable bowel syndrome (Coulson, 2005). Reflecting on this study, we can also see areas for development, which would improve the applicability and objectives of media framing analysis as a method. This analysis was limited to news stories in the print media (newspapers and television channel news websites) but there is potential for seeking other kinds of media texts, such as excerpts from television broadcasts, internet podcasts, and editorial blogs. Furthermore, this analysis focused largely on written text alone. It would be possible to conduct an

analysis of the pictures, headline size, positioning of other (un)related stories as well as advertisements, alongside the text if the original copies of newspaper articles are obtained. Nevertheless, this analysis successfully demonstrates the benefits of investigating in-depth the impact of specific mechanisms of media framing in the construction of a news story. Each of the five stages represents a different discursive or narrative function employed by the creators of news media in order to lead the reader to a particular interpretation and away from alternative ones. This analysis demonstrated the power of a negative frame, which drew upon a narrative of nature and in parallel evoked the taboo of ageing motherhood with the implied effect of alienating older mothers.

This analysis of the media framing of older mothers has, therefore, revealed that notions of 'normative' development and the 'perfect mother' continue to structure cultural constructions of motherhood. Feminist research on motherhood has empowered women by raising awareness that mothering is not always idyllic, and maternal ambivalence is now a widely accepted concept (Parker, 1995). Nevertheless, it has yet to address the issue of the unconventional mother (Letherby, 1999). It seems that our communications systems – our popular culture – are not always successful in capturing the diversity of contemporary society. Or perhaps, our analysis reveals nostalgia for old-fashioned ideas, which contradict the advances of science. It will be interesting to observe whether representations of ageing motherhood will change in the future as changing social values and advancing technology enable more and more women to have children later in life.

Note

1. For the sake of brevity, in most cases we have cited the newspapers as sources of quotes rather than those directly responsible for them. It might surprise the reader to learn that The Guardian quote in this sentence was articulated by the journalist herself, while The Sun quote comes from an interviewee in a very balanced article on the pros and cons of older motherhood.

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Appendix

Table A1. "Master table" of articles in dataset.

ID	Day	Paper	Article (page; words)	Position	
1	Mon	Guardian	News (1; 583)	Neutral but slightly +ve (pic. of Patricia Rashbrook "success")	+
2	Mon	Express	News (23; 331)	Neutral but slightly -ve ('controversy', 'surge') (pic. of Patricia Rashbrook)	-
3	Mon	Mail	News (19; 726)	Broadly +ve; some mild skepticism (pics of Patricia Rashbrook and 'supporter')	+
4	Tue	Times	Feature (2/6; 1087)	Case study using actress interview - cagily +ve but with underlying -ve subtext	?
5	Tue	Guardian	Leader (34; 425)	Very +ve, focus on sexism/ethics of IVF	+
6	Tue	Express	News long (16; 1380)	Strongly -ve case study to try to counteract findings - more about Patricia Rashbrook/Path Farrant community setting than her own experience	-
7	Wed	Times	News (23; 508)	Strongly -ve report of Older Mothers' daughters' infertility risk	-
8	Wed	Sun	News (X; 84)	Cursory report of study no. 2	-
9	Wed	Guardian	News (15; 757)	In-depth report of study no. 2, somewhat -ve, but cautious	-
10	Wed	Telegraph	Features (21; 770)	Strongly -ve rant against "indulgent generation"	-
11	Mon	Independent	Politics (18; 706)	Broadly +ve report, detailed but loosely structured	+
12	Tue	Guardian	Features (9; 970)	Broadly -ve column, warning against Older Mothers, pre-occupied with physical decay	-
13	Wed	Guardian	Comment (33; 633)	Vaguely -ve; rather cynical, ducks issue of study no. 1 to attack "mainstream media"	-
14	Thur	Independent	Opinion (34; 1052)	Summary of other articles;	
15	Tue	Sun	Woman (X; 699/?)	Very balanced article, giving both sides of argument equal voice	
16	Wed	Independent	News (4; 444)	Rather -ve report of no. 2	-
17	Wed	Guardian	News (7; 250)	Rather -ve report of no. 2	-
18	Wed	Express	News (19; 349)	Ditto	-

(Continued)

Table A1. Continued.

ID	Day	Paper	Article (page; words)	Position	
19	Wed	Telegraph	News (1; 200)	Straight report, so straight that gives first hint that Peter Nagy's warnings might be speculative and that he's generalizing from sample to population	-
20	Mon	bbc.co.uk		As newspaper reports	-
21	Wed	bbc.co.uk		Bill Ledger quoted on Older Mothers, deviating somewhat from study no. 2 findings (also suggests that Older Fathers can be blamed too)	-
22	Mon	Times	News (1; 855)	Positive, in-depth front page coverage	+
23	Mon	Telegraph	News (2; 442)	Generally positive news feature	+
24	Mon	Mirror	News (27; 115)	Brief news item	+
25	Wed	Mail	News (35; 1974)	Extensive current affairs feature, with case study	+
26	Wed	Independent	Opinion (36; 264)	Positive editorial column	+
27	Wed	Mail	News (8; 775)	Strongly negative coverage of study no. 2	-

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