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**‘Risky business’: Constructing the ‘choice’ to ‘delay’ motherhood in the British press.**

**Key words: media discourse, thematic analysis, delayed motherhood, choice, risk**

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## **‘Risky business’: Constructing the ‘choice’ to ‘delay’ motherhood in the British press.**

### **Abstract**

Over the last few decades the number of women becoming pregnant later on in life has markedly increased. Medical experts have raised concerns about the increase in the number of women having babies later, owing to evidence that suggests that advancing maternal age is associated with both a decline in fertility and an increase in health risks to both mother and baby (Nwandison & Bewley, 2006). In recognition of these risks, experts have warned that women should aim to complete their families between the ages of twenty and thirty-five (Bewley, Davis and Braude, 2005). As a consequence, women giving birth past the age of thirty-five have typically been positioned as ‘older mothers.’ In this paper we used a social constructionist thematic analysis in order to analyse how ‘older mothers’ are represented in newspaper articles in the British press. We examined how the topics of ‘choice’ and ‘risk’ are handled in discussions of delayed motherhood, and 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. Moreover, we noted the newspapers also constructed a ‘right’ time for women to become pregnant. As such, we discuss the implications for the ability of women to make real choices surrounding the timing of pregnancy.

## **Introduction**

The number of women in England and Wales becoming pregnant later in life has increased over the last few decades (Office for National Statistics, 2006). Recently published statistics show that the fertility rates for women over thirty-five and forty continue to rise, with the number of women having babies over the age of forty almost trebling over the last twenty years (Office for National Statistics, 2010). Commentators have observed similar trends in other western nations including the US (Heffner, 2004) and Australia (Carolan, 2005). ‘Older mothers’ are generally medically defined as women who have their first babies at age thirty-five or over (International Council of Obstetricians, 1958, cited in Barkan & Bracken, 1987, p. 101). Using this definition, statistics show that the number of first time mothers (within marriage<sup>1</sup>) over thirty-five increased by almost two thirds between 1998 and 2008 (Office for National Statistics, 2009). Health professionals have highlighted that their main causes for concern with the trend towards older motherhood are the associated decline in fertility and increase in health risks to mother and baby (see Nwandison & Bewley, 2006 for an overview). This research appears to suggest that the increase in risk of complications is directly related to the age of the mother, however elsewhere this association is critiqued (Carolan and Nelson, 2007; Hanson, 2003; Mansfield and McCool, 1989). In this paper we discuss the emerging ‘trend’ for women to have babies increasingly later on in life, and look at how women who have their babies at this later age are represented in a selection of British newspaper articles. We go on to discuss the implications such representations may have for women’s ‘choice’ in relation to the timing of motherhood.

Following the movement towards equality for women, the number of women entering the paid workforce has increased alongside the range of other opportunities open to women (Callahan, 2009). Widespread introduction and encouragement of contraceptive use also means that women have greater control over when they become pregnant. Consequently, there is an implication today that the timing of motherhood is a woman's choice (Shaw & Giles, 2009), which may in turn may give rise to the notion that some women are choosing to delay or postpone first motherhood until later in life, when it is suggested to be more risky. However, some commentators have noted alternative and more circumstantial reasons behind the 'trend,' including fertility problems (Berryman, Thorpe & Windridge, 1995) or the lack of an appropriate partner (Berryman, Thorpe & Windridge, 1995; Carolan, 2007). Shaw (in press) notes similar observations with respect to voluntarily childless women. She found that although women in her study defined voluntarily childlessness as a decision or choice, she questioned the nature of their choice, observing that women's choices around childlessness were also influenced by circumstance.

If indeed the perception of older mothers today is that that they are 'choosing' to have babies later in life, this may leave them open to criticism that they are no longer taking full advantage of their biological window of opportunity in which they can safely conceive. As such women may then be held accountable if they fail to make the 'right' decision in relation to timing of childbirth--- that is, choosing a time which will present them with the least opportunity for incurring risks. In addition our society is said to be "implicitly pronatalist" (Smajdor, 2009, p. 107). It is assumed that all women will have (and will want to have) children and motherhood is seen as a natural, 'normal', and quintessential part of femininity (Russo, 1976). We are made aware of this when we consider women who do not have children---Gillespie (2000)

found that women who choose to remain childless are often considered selfish, deviant and unfeminine, whilst women who are unable to have children are pitied and considered desperate and unfulfilled (Letherby, 1999). Thus, given the associations between advancing maternal age, declining fertility and increased risk, society may take issue with those women whose 'choice' to delay pregnancy until later in life may place their biological fulfilment 'at risk.'

The choice to postpone motherhood might be perceived as one of the ways in which women can 'have it all.' By focusing on education and careers and then pursuing motherhood, women may be able to enjoy a successful career alongside having a family. Rosalind Gill (2007b) suggests that notions of choice and autonomy are at the heart of both postfeminist and neo-liberal discourses. Central also to what Gill defines as a 'postfeminist sensibility' (Gill, 2007b) come the ideas of "being oneself" and "pleasing oneself" (p.153), which may work to sanction a woman's choice to 'delay' motherhood in the quest to 'have it all'. However, discussions of risks associated with the postponement of pregnancy may function to warn women of what may potentially be at stake as a result of this pursuit.

Lippman describes 'choice' as a "central tenet in the women's health movement" (1999, p. 281) and emphasis on choice is a prevailing feature of government guidelines on maternity care (Department of Health, 1993; 2007). However, studies looking at choice in relation to pregnancy and childbirth suggest that although women are constructed as having choice, these choices are limited through parameters set by discussions of risk (Marshall & Woollett, 2000).

The notion of risk is something that scholars have increasingly turned their attentions to in the past few decades (Beck, 1992; Heyman, Alaszewski, Shaw & Titterton, 2009; Lupton, 1999) and some authors (e.g. Lupton, 1999) have linked our

society's preoccupation with risk with Foucault's notion of governmentality (Foucault, 1991). According to such theorists, the contemporary notion of risk is one which serves to observe, monitor and contribute to the surveillance of the population. Central to this theory is the idea that individuals are positioned within governmental discourses as active, with the capacity for self-surveillance (Lupton, 1999). Thus it is suggested that once made aware of risk individuals are responsible for avoiding it as it is within their best interests. As such individuals are positioned as accountable for adverse outcomes in the event they failed to put themselves out of harm's way.

Kitzinger (1999 p.55) notes, "the media are crucial players in the construction of, and communication about, risk" and Day, Gough and McFadden (2004) have argued that an analysis of the media can provide researchers with an excellent opportunity to study the prevailing and common sense assumptions about the world which it reflects. Indeed, social scientific research is gathering on media representations of health-related topics. Fairclough (1995, p. 103) notes that "media texts do not merely 'mirror realities' as is sometimes naively assumed; they constitute versions of reality"---for example, events and categories of person. As such, through an analysis of media representations it is suggested one may gain a good sense of the way in which society is viewing a particular event or category of person, as well as an understanding of the media's own role in constructing these.

The media constitutes one of sites in which gender is constructed (Gill, 2007) and Litosseliti suggests: "despite profound changes in social expectations and gender roles, women are still disproportionately represented as sex objects, as mothers and wives" (2006, p. 93). With reference to motherhood, it has been suggested that the media have a preference to focus on challenges to traditional motherhood (Hadfield, Rudoe & Sanderson-Mann, 2007). For example, existing literature discusses the

representation of lesbian mothers (Allred, 1998), and mothers with disabilities (van Kraayenoord, 2002). Such representations may consider such groups of women to be challenging notions of the 'good mother' as one who is selfless (Raddon, 2002). For example, lesbian mothers are represented as selfish and morally reprehensible for putting their children at risk of prejudice and bullying (Allred, 1998).

In terms of age, mothers who are considered to be either 'too young'---teen aged mothers, or 'too old'---women over thirty-five constitute violations of 'the norm' (Hadfield, Rudoie & Sanderson-Mann, 2007) and so both older motherhood and teenage motherhood are often considered 'abnormal' or deviant. Analysis of media representations of young working class or 'chav' mothers notes an emphasis on their "sluttish behaviour" and a propensity to have "multiple pregnancies" and "excessively reproductive bodies" (Tyler, 2008, p.30). In this paper Tyler observes that, in contrast to discussions of the decline in fertility of older, middle-class women, 'chav' mums are represented as white, working-class teenaged mothers who have "easy fertility." She notes that this is "bound up with a set of social angst about dropping fertility rates amongst middle-class women, a group continually chastised for 'putting career over motherhood' and 'leaving it too late' to have children" (Tyler, 2008, p.30).

Betterton (2002) notes that prevailing visual representations of pregnant women exclude the pregnant body of the older mother, observing "it is routinely pathologized in medical and media discourses" (p. 260)---a view which is evidenced in the medical literature on older mothers. Meanwhile as a subject of increasing medical and social debate, 'older motherhood' has become increasingly newsworthy over the last decade or so. In their analysis of newspapers, Shaw and Giles (2009) noted that articles were framed in a way that directed the reader towards certain interpretations of older mothers and away from others. They concluded that older



mothers were negatively framed in the media and that the cultural construction of a 'perfect mother'---that is, one who is not 'too old,' amongst other qualities, prevails. The present study observes how the topics of choice and risk in relation to women who 'delay' childbirth are discussed in British newspapers.

Examining representations of individuals, groups and issues in the news media is important because, as Fairclough notes, the mass media has the power "to influence knowledge, beliefs, values, social relations, social identities" (1995, p. 2). Moreover, it is argued that representations in the media can both produce and reproduce meaning and are influential at both societal and individual levels. For example, it is suggested that the media may influence individuals' perceptions concerning the degree of risk they face, which may in turn influence the behaviour of individuals in response to these perceived risks or threats to health (Lyons, 2000). In this way, media representations may hold implications for individual subjectivity or sense of self as they may, for example take up the position of one who is 'at risk.' Davies and Harré (1990) argue that discursive practices used in language can constitute individuals in different ways or provide them with subject positions. They suggest that once an individual has taken up a subject position, he or she will see the world from the vantage point of that position, which will then have implications for their individual subjectivity.

The aim of this paper is to examine the subject positions offered to older mothers in media discourse in order to illuminate the dominant ideologies of motherhood that are operating within our society and explore the implications these may have for women who become mothers at an older age.

## **Method**

## Sampling

Using the popular search engine 'Google' as a tool, an online search for newspaper articles relating to the search term 'older mothers' was conducted<sup>2</sup>. This particular method was used because we are aware that Google is mostly used by the general public as a first stop to search the Internet for information, and were initially interested to discover what types of information the general public could access about the topic of 'older motherhood.' Relevant articles were defined as those whose subject matter was 'older mothers,' or women having babies past the age of thirty-five. Many of the articles initially identified were accompanied by online links to similar material and these were also followed up. We then entered the same search term into the search engines for each individual newspaper to ensure any relevant material had not been missed. Finally, once the initial search term 'older mothers' had been exhausted (marked when searches failed to produce any further relevant material) it was modified to try and tease out some additional data on the main issues surrounding older mothers which had emerged amongst the data already collected, for example using 'older mothers risk.' This enabled us to ensure that no issues relating to the topic had been overlooked.

Following exhaustion of these search terms twenty-six newspaper articles published between 2001 and 2009 made up the final data corpus. These included articles from The Sun (2), The Independent (7), The Daily Mail (Mail Online) (4), The Telegraph (4), The Times (4), The Sunday Times (1), The Guardian (2), The Observer (2). The corpus consisted of news stories (13), feature articles (10) and a smaller number of comment pieces (3). We recognise that the articles collected were taken from a range of newspapers, although predominantly broadsheets, and that these newspapers will vary as to their values, broad political persuasion and common

readership. Such variations in newspapers may to some extent determine how they present older motherhood for their readers, according to potentially varying agendas. However, we feel a discussion of the implications of these apparent differences does not fall within the scope for this particular paper, as we are concerned with the way in which discourses relating to older mothers are both reflected and constructed within the media. As such, our focus lies within the potential impact of such discourses on the subjectivities of women defined as 'older mothers' and not with the specific agendas or intentions of particular organisations within the media.

### Analytic approach

The articles were analysed using a Social Constructionist Thematic Analysis (for other examples see Singer & Hunter, 1999; Taylor & Ussher, 2001). Thematic analysis is defined as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that although thematic analysis is often described as a realist and experiential method, it is also compatible with a constructionist position. Here a social constructionist version of thematic analysis enabled us to identify discourses as 'themes' within the data set. The corpus was analysed using the six stages of thematic analysis as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

### **Analysis**

Consistent with a social constructionist position, there was a specific focus on the language used in the newspapers to construct discourses of the older mother. We took a Foucauldian approach to textual analysis as it enabled us to identify the different discursive resources available in our culture and the subject positions created for older mothers by the media. It is suggested that the discursive resources we have

available to us can impact on our subjectivity---our ways of seeing, and ways of being in the world (Willig, 2008). In this way, language constructs our subjectivity (Weedon, 1997). Therefore, in deconstructing the language in the newspapers we were able to observe the ways in which older mothers were positioned, or the ways of being that were constructed for them within the texts.

The initial analysis of the newspaper articles identified four discourses related to older mothers in the media; older motherhood as a choice, older motherhood as 'risky,' older mothers as problem mothers, and older mothers as good mothers. However, for the purposes of this paper we will examine aspects of just two of those four discourses, focusing on the notions of 'choice' and 'risk' and the implications these particular discourses have for women in relation to the timing of motherhood.

#### Timing of pregnancy: a woman's choice

Throughout the corpus, the newspaper articles consistently referred to the timing of pregnancy as a woman's choice, suggesting that women who have babies later on in life are invariably those who choose to do so. Elsewhere, the notion of choice has also been found to be a prominent theme among representations of voluntarily childless women in the media (Giles, Shaw & Morgan, 2009). A consequence of presenting the timing of pregnancy as a choice here was that older mothers were positioned as being responsible for the timing of their pregnancy. Many of the newspaper articles discussed the recent rise in the number of older mothers in Britain, and implied that this rise was a response to the increasing number of women choosing to have babies later in life.

The national rise [in older mothers] was mainly attributed to social and economic factors, with more women choosing to put their career before starting a family. (The Times, February 29, 2008, emphasis ours)

The average age of British women giving birth is stable at 29, but the numbers of women choosing to start families in their late thirties and early forties has risen sharply. (The Observer, October 28, 2007, emphasis ours)

Where the verb ‘choose’ was not explicitly used, other phrases such as “putting pregnancy on hold” (The Sun, September 24, 2008), “delaying motherhood” (The Independent, December 2, 2006), “leave it late” (The Observer, October 28, 2007) “waiting longer” (The Telegraph, July 1, 2008), “trend to put-off starting families” (The Guardian, October 25, 2006), and “postponing having children” (The Times, October 25, 2006) were all used by the newspapers to describe women having babies at a later age. As Shaw and Giles (2009) point out, the verbs used here, such as ‘leave,’ ‘delay,’ ‘postpone,’ ‘wait,’ all reflect the dominant ideology of femininity: that motherhood is a necessary and mandatory part of women’s lives. In our society we expect that women will have, and, what is more, will want to have children, and so older mothers are those who are delaying the inevitable.

Additionally, the verbs used in these descriptions all have one thing in common when discussed in relation to older mothers: they imply agency. When we talk of someone waiting we imply the person is active in this; they are allowing time to pass. Postponing or delaying assign more agency as they imply that something that was either meant to happen, or could have happened sooner is actively being ‘put back’ by the agent. The point here is that with agency comes choice, and on the surface this would appear to be a positive thing: arguably women should be able to make a choice about the timing of pregnancy. However, this discourse begins to

become problematic for older mothers, that is, mothers who delay the ‘choice’ to have babies past the age of thirty-five, when the newspapers begin discussing the ‘choice’ to become pregnant later alongside the risks that increase with advancing maternal age.

### Constructing a ‘right time’ to mother---is timing a ‘real’ choice?

Something that was also evident in the newspapers is that they constructed the notion that there is a ‘right time’ to have children; a biologically ‘optimum’ age range in which women should endeavour to start and complete their families in order to curtail the associated risks.

The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) is urging would-be mothers to have children between the ages of 20 and 35 to minimise the chances of childbirth damaging their own or their baby’s health. (The Guardian, June 15, 2009)

Older mothers face greater risks during pregnancy and birth, and leading doctors have said it is safest to have babies between 20 and 35. (The Telegraph, March 1, 2008)

Given the assumption that the timing of pregnancy is a woman’s choice, the effect of this is to position women who have a baby outside this ‘biologically optimum’ timeframe as non-normative or deviant---and that includes teen aged as well as older mothers (Hadfield, Rudoe & Sanderson-Mann, 2007). The implication here then is that if the timing of motherhood is a woman’s choice, those women who are aware of the risks associated with delayed childbearing and still choose to have children outside this ‘biologically optimum’ timeframe are making the wrong choice. It is

suggested that any woman who knows of the associated risks should then choose to have babies at the 'right' time.

Knowing the constraints, rational women would choose to have completed their families by 35. (The Sunday Times, August 13, 2006)

Despite being positioned as decision-makers and as accountable for those decisions, this leads us to question to what extent the timing of pregnancy is actually a woman's choice. It seems that it is only a choice so long as women make the 'right' choice. In agreement with Marshall and Woollett (2000) who looked at women's choice in relation to decisions to be made about pregnancy, we suggest that the timing of pregnancy is discussed as a choice, yet the 'window' of choice in which it is acceptable for women to become pregnant is limited by parameters set by risk. Women who choose the 'wrong time' to become pregnant are those who are accountable for their decisions and so any unfavourable outcomes they may experience. In contrast, by implication, those women who become pregnant within the suggested or desirable timeframes who, aware of the risks, have exercised their choice appropriately, are more likely to be viewed sympathetically in the event of any unfortunate outcomes.

In addition to this, many of the articles speculate about the reasons why women may be choosing to 'delay' pregnancy, with one of the most cited being the desire to pursue and develop a career.

More women are delaying motherhood as they enjoy their careers. (The Independent, December 2, 2006)

And it's not just Posh [Victoria Beckham] putting pregnancy on hold to focus on her job. The average age at which women in Britain give birth has slowly

risen in recent years...High-profile career-minded mothers such as Nicole Kidman, who gave birth to her first child at 41, and Madonna, who became a mum at 38, typify the trend. (The Sun, September 24, 2008)

The articles speculate that the most common reason for women to delay motherhood, and the reason that is contributing most to the rise in older mothers, is the fact that more women are going out to work and enjoying careers before settling down to marriage and starting a family. Again, words like 'delay' and phrases such as 'putting pregnancy on hold' suggest that putting a career first is a choice. Again these assumptions reflect society's pronatalism---older mothers are seen as those who delay the inevitability of motherhood in order to put something else first; in this case careers.

#### Questioning the 'choice' to be an older mother

In contrast to the overarching discourse in the media where the timing of motherhood is framed as a woman's choice, a small number of the articles discuss the difficulties women face in making decisions about the timing of motherhood and pursuing a career, remarking that the timing of pregnancy is not always a straightforward choice. Constructions of the timing of motherhood as an outcome of social or economic circumstances, rather than a woman's choice were rare in the articles and a similar paucity was found in an analysis relating to older mothers in women's magazines (see Beaulieu & Lippman, 1995), however we give one example here:

Dr Bewley advised women to complete their families between the ages of 20 and 35 to lessen the risk of complications. But many women simply do not have the choice. Taking a career break so early on in working life can be



highly detrimental in a society that affords motherhood little status. (The Independent, December 2, 2006)

What is being recognised here is that, despite the suggestion that women should choose have children at the ‘right time’ in order to reduce the risks, it is not always that easy. The suggestion is that the world of work is not structured in a way that enables women to take career breaks early in order to have children at the ‘right time’---between the ages of twenty and thirty-five. This is followed by the implication that having children at the ‘right time’ by taking a career break can be “highly detrimental in a society that affords motherhood little status.” Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that early motherhood can impact negatively on women’s future career prospects and financial earnings (Dixon and Margo, 2006). Something this quote also suggests is that women need to work in order to achieve their status in society. Despite the implicit importance we place on women having children and the negative perceptions of those women who choose to remain childless (Gillespie, 2000), the suggestion is that motherhood is not enough for them to warrant positive recognition from society---society places value on those who work and are successful in their careers.

Other articles which allude to the restrictions that the socio-political context places on the ability for women to have babies earlier in life, suggest that possible solutions to the increase in late motherhood and the risk of infertility in older women could lie in amendments to social policy.

Earlier career breaks for women would help, while shared parental leave should help them feel less under pressure about achieving a certain level of career success before giving birth. (The Guardian, June 15, 2009)

The suggestion is that these amendments to policy, enabling earlier career breaks and the development of a shared parenting culture, may provide a solution. Assuming women want to have a family as well as a career, these changes would enable them to do just that. However, as noted above, despite allowing women to start their family at the 'right time,' early career breaks can have a negative impact on a woman's career prospects and lead to financial losses. We would also suggest that although the importance of a woman pursuing a career is alluded to, motherhood is still constructed as a woman's most salient aspiration---the proposed solutions enable women to 'have it all,' but in a way in which allows them to put the most important thing first: securing pregnancy and motherhood before continuing with a career. Furthermore, as the quote below suggests, those women who, having had the opportunity to begin a family, choose to put their careers first have made the wrong choice.

“But you have to look at personal circumstances---it may be impractical for women without a partner or not at the right stage of their life.”

“What is sad is someone who has had an opportunity to have a baby and delays the decision for professional reasons until, say, 38, assuming it is all right and then it isn't.” (The Independent, August 15, 2001)

The implication is that a career does not constitute a good enough reason to risk the chance to become a mother. If your circumstances are right, that is, you have a partner and are at the right stage of your life, you should have a baby when you can. Those women who make a decision to delay pregnancy for a career are constructed as having missed their opportunity to have a family, and as this is a choice, these women are placed as accountable if they remain involuntarily childless as a result. In contrast, for those women who are not in the right circumstances, it is 'impractical' to mother early and so their delayed motherhood is constructed as justified. The suggestion is

that a woman is well within her rights to pursue a career as well as a family; however, motherhood should come first---especially if women have the choice. In this way, despite some discussion of the difficulties that might constrain a woman's complete ability to choose the timing of pregnancy and recognition about the difficulties for women in 'having it all,' women are still positioned as being accountable for making the 'right' choice---that is, having children as soon as possible (yet not too early): the choice that puts their biological fulfilment at least risk.

As we will now examine, the discussion of choice in relation to timing of pregnancy alongside the risks associated with older maternal age, assigns accountability to older mothers for taking 'risks.'

#### Older motherhood--- a risky choice

In the newspaper articles the association between advancing maternal age and both an increase in health risks to mother and baby and infertility in women is extensively discussed. The suggestion by many of the articles is that the longer women 'wait' to start a family, the harder it will be for them to conceive, owing to a decline in fertility with age, and the more risky it will be in terms of health to both mother and baby. The apparent increase in risks is something which is at least mentioned in most of the newspaper articles, and in others is discussed at length, for example:

Older mothers are at greater risk of diabetes, high blood pressure and are more likely to need a caesarean. (The Telegraph, March 1, 2008).

All the risks associated with pregnancy and birth rise sharply over the age of 35, including miscarriage, birth defects and problems such as high blood

pressure and diabetes affecting the mother, Professor Morris said. (The Independent, November 28, 2008)

The newspapers are persuasive in their accounts of the risks associated with older motherhood, and this is achieved by the use of a number of discursive devices which present the risks as 'reality.' For example, both of the quotes above make use of three part lists (Jefferson, 1990), which are highly persuasive rhetorical devices. Here, they are used to shore up their claim that risks increase with advancing maternal age, and so to convince the reader of the 'reality' of these risks. When discussing the increase in risks there was also considerable evidence of using category entitlements (Potter, 1996) or quotes from 'experts,' in the case above, Professor Morris. This use of the 'expert' has the effect of what Potter calls constructing consensus and corroboration---in quoting the views of a 'medical expert' who has particular knowledge entitlements (Potter, 1996), the link between maternal age and risk is able to be presented as something factual and to be believed.

In addition, when the medical risks associated with maternal age are discussed alongside the choice for women to delay pregnancy, women are positioned as taking risks---older women who have children are willingly putting themselves and their babies at risk.

Choosing to delay childbirth until after 35 increases the risk of heart disease, diabetes and high blood pressure, University of Ohio scientists found. (The Sun, February 28, 2008)

Doctors say that older mothers may be risking their own health and that of their babies by delaying pregnancy until later in life. (The Times, February 29, 2008)

Moreover, it is suggested that women are aware of the risks associated with later pregnancies “Later pregnancies, of course, carry serious health implications for both mother and child” (The Independent, December 2, 2006, emphasis ours)---the ‘of course’ implying that the risks are common knowledge. As a consequence, it is implied that not only are women making a choice about the timing of pregnancy, they are making an informed choice, choosing to ‘take risks’ or ‘gamble’ with their fertility. In this way, having known the facts and taken the risks “despite warnings” (The Daily Mail, February 27, 2007) from health professionals, women are positioned as culpable and ‘to blame’ for any undesirable outcomes associated with delayed pregnancy that they may incur.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

In this paper we have raised some important issues relating to choice, risk and the timing of pregnancy when considering the topic of advancing maternal age. Our analysis of British newspapers revealed the ways in which women were positioned as responsible for making choices concerning the timing of motherhood. We also examined how the media’s construction of the increase in risks associated with advancing maternal age continued to position women as accountable for their choice to ‘delay.’ We are not necessarily challenging the scientific literature detailing increased risks associated with advancing maternal age, although some have (Carolan and Nelson, 2007; Hanson, 2003; Mansfield and McCool, 1989); however, we consider it of interest to look at what the newspapers choose to report on. Indeed, very little room is given to discussing the probability of positive birth outcomes---the media lays its focus with the negative. The way in which the media reports the health risks relating to older motherhood is, generally speaking, vastly oversimplified and reflects common practice with respect to risk categorisation. There is medical

evidence to suggest the risks increase with maternal age, and as such older mothers are considered to be an 'at risk' category of women. As a result of such risk categorisation the problems associated with the category are effectively applied to all of its members, thus positioning all older mothers as 'at risk,' despite the likelihood that the majority of women in this category will have no complications whatsoever. However, the reality of this situation is rarely discussed and indeed this was reflected in the newspaper data.

Although on the surface the construction of the timing of pregnancy as a woman's choice may be a positive thing, one of our concerns is that in framing the timing of pregnancy as a woman's choice, in conjunction with discussing the risks of later maternity, women are effectively positioned as to blame if they are unfortunate enough to experience any of the adverse outcomes which are said to be associated with the time that they chose to start their families. This kind of representation may be considered characteristic of the contradictions of a post feminist media culture (Gill, 2007b) whereby "notions of autonomy, choice and self-improvement" are said to "sit side-by-side with surveillance, discipline and the vilification of those who make the 'wrong' 'choices'" (p. 163).

We also suggest that the very notion that the timing of pregnancy is a woman's choice is problematic. The newspapers make the assumption that all women are able to make this choice, with career plans often cited as the reason most women 'choose to delay.' The notion of choice, by definition, carries with it the implication that circumstances are such that you can make a real choice. Although some of the articles recognised that the timing of pregnancy is not always a straightforward choice and that circumstances may dictate the timing of pregnancy for many women, these were in the minority and were largely overshadowed by the more dominant notion

that women were actively choosing later motherhood. Although there is some evidence to support this (Carolan, 2007), other research contradicts this assumption, and suggests that, for the majority of women, later pregnancy is related to circumstance---most commonly, the lack of an appropriate partner (Berryman, Thorpe & Windridge, 1999; Carolan, 2007). Therefore the dominant discourse suggesting that the timing of pregnancy is a woman's choice may be oppressive for many women for whom later motherhood was not a choice. These particular women may find themselves having to actively resist this discourse and justify their reasons for 'delaying' motherhood in order to avoid the accountability it brings with it.

This study also lends support to the increasing body of research, which suggests that choice and risk in pregnancy and birth are inextricably bound up with one another (Marshall & Woollett, 2000). Despite women being positioned as responsible for the timing of pregnancy, messages concerning the notion of a 'right' time for a woman to become pregnant were consistently woven through the newspapers. This 'right' time was shaped and limited through discussions about age-associated risks and pregnancy. This analysis therefore supports the idea that there is an 'illusion of choice' in relation to motherhood---similar to that seen in discussions of maternity care (Kirkham, 2004). Women are said to have full choice, however there is still a societal expectation that they should have their babies at the 'biologically optimal' time---twenty to thirty-five (Smajdor, 2009). What is more, societal pronatalism ensures that the timing of motherhood is the only 'choice' for women---it is expected that women will become mothers, so the only question, or the only 'choice' is when. In addition, the way in which women were discussed as delaying pregnancy for a career in the newspapers framed motherhood as inevitable and something that women, given the choice, should prioritize and not place 'at risk.'

Something we did not explore in any depth was the potential implication of the political stances taken by the newspapers that made up our sample. Variations in political persuasion and common readership may impact upon the way in which ‘older mothers’ are represented in these articles and what these particular representations may be set out to achieve. For instance, it is interesting that the corpus is largely made up of broadsheets, whose common readership largely consists of individuals of higher status (Wing Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007). As such, their representation of ‘older mothers’ as women who are risking motherhood for a career and status are interesting, as these women are likely to be amongst their target audience. This potentially suggests a particular political agenda---to warn their female readers of the dangers of compromising motherhood by ‘leaving it late’, and presenting what may be at stake as a result of the quest to ‘have it all.’

The notion of choice in relation to timing of motherhood presented in the newspapers is characteristic of neoliberal discourses where individuals are constructed as “autonomous, rationally calculating, and free” (Gill & Arthurs, 2008, p. 45). Gill and Arthurs also suggest that neoliberal discourses, in Foucauldian terms, construct individuals as ‘self-governing’ and we suggest that the possible impact of the discourse that constructs the timing of pregnancy as a woman’s choice may be linked to Foucault’s notion of governmentality (1991), as raising awareness of risks through institutions like the media may be a way of encouraging the self-monitoring of ‘risky’ behaviour. The idea is that once women are made aware of the risks they face they should choose to have babies at the safest time. Furthermore, in constructing the timing of pregnancy as a woman’s choice, accountability in the event of adverse outcome is assigned to the individual and directed away from the state. Supporting this idea is the fact that these newspaper articles give little attention to the societal



structures that are in place which may actually limit the extent to which timing of pregnancy is a real choice for women and could actually be seen to dictate the timing of pregnancy. For example, articles very rarely mentioned the current economic climate whereby couples essentially need two healthy incomes in order to achieve a good standard of living, or the lack of family friendly policies which enable women to take career breaks early on to have a family without compromising their careers. As it stands, 'choosing' to put a family before developing a career would constitute a big step back in the quest for equality for women. Instead of 'taking risks' we would suggest that older mothers today are those who are making rational decisions as a response to the current economic and social conditions---later pregnancy in this socio-political context makes sense.

**Notes:**

1. Statistics for age of mother at first birth outside marriage are unavailable.
2. While we believe that our rationale for using 'Google' as a search tool to collect our data was justified, we wanted to see what kinds of information the general public would find in relation to 'older mothers.' We also recognise that our analysis may have been improved by completing a more systematic search using a package such as Lexis Nexis. This may have resulted in a larger data corpus and so would have potentially enabled us to identify a greater number of articles where discussions of choice and risk did not prevail---as it was these kinds of articles were deviant cases in our data corpus.

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## **Appendix**

List of all articles collected and analysed

"Late motherhood: they did it, can you?" (no author cited), The Independent, August 15, 2001

“Older, wiser and so much closer to my kids” (no author cited) The Times (Times Online), December 17, 2004

“Career women make early thirties most popular age to start a family, by Maxine Frith, The Independent, December 16, 2005

“Rise in twins linked to hormone changes in older mothers” by Roger Highfield, The Telegraph, February 23, 2006

“Older mothers ‘are a drain on NHS’” (no author cited) The Daily Mail (Mail Online) August 13, 2006

“Late motherhood as ‘big a problem’ as teenage mums” by Sarah-Kate Templeton, The Sunday Times, August 13, 2006

“Older mothers risk fertility of daughters” by Ian Sample, The Guardian, October 25, 2006

“Older mothers ‘put their daughters at risk of infertility’” by Mark Henderson, The Times, October 25, 2006

“The changing face of motherhood” (no author cited) The Independent, December 2, 2006

“Motherhood begins at 45” by Sophie Goodchild & Jonathan Owen, The Independent, December 31, 2006

“Britain’s legion of 45-year old first-time mothers” by Daniel Martin, The Daily Mail (Mail Online) February 27, 2007

“Worried about being a late mum? Don’t, say the experts” by Amelia Hill, The Observer, October 28, 2007



“Late motherhood: Why babies can’t wait” by Jeremy Laurance, [The Independent](#),  
January 15, 2008

“Why older women turn out to be better mothers” by Lowri Turner, [The Daily Mail](#)  
(Mail Online) February 21, 2008

“What age to fall pregnant?” (no author cited), [The Sun](#), February 28, 2008

“Pregnancy rate among over-40s soars as women delay babies for their careers”, by  
David Rose, [The Times](#) (Times Online), February 29, 2008

“Pregnancies rise among middle-aged women” by Rebecca Smith, [The Telegraph](#),  
March 1, 2008

“Older celebrity mums ‘promote myth of fertility’” by Kate Devlin, [The Telegraph](#),  
20 March, 2008

“The truth about older mothers” by Corinne Sweet, [The Independent](#), June 7, 2008

“Older mothers driving up caesarean rates” by Kate Devlin, [The Telegraph](#), July 1,  
2008

“Should Posh wait for kids?” by Judy Cogan, [The Sun](#), September 24, 2008

“Mothers and the age debate: When is it best to have babies?” by Lucy Rock, [The](#)  
[Observer](#), September 28, 2008

“Will older mothers regret their choice?” by Serena Allott, [The Daily Mail](#) (Mail  
Online), October 12, 2008

“The problems of being an older mum” by Joan McFadden & Alexandra Blair, [The](#)  
[Times](#) (Times Online) November 18, 2008

“The baby clock: Birth survey has reignited debate on delayed motherhood” by  
Jeremy Laurance, The Independent, November 28, 2008

“Doctors warn of risks to older mothers” by Denis Campbell, The Guardian, June 15,  
2009

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