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Constructing Ageing and Age Identity: A case study of newspaper discourses



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Executive Summary

Public discourses concerning older people are available in a range of texts, including official policy documents, research reports and popular media, including television and newspapers. The texts of public discourses reveal both explicit and implicit ways of positioning older people that, in turn, confer on them particular identities.

This study examined discursive formations of ageing and age identity in print media. Newspaper texts associated with a single media event were examined; the media event concerned a decision by the Irish Government in late 2008 to withdraw automatic entitlement to a free medical care for people aged seventy years and over. The welfare policy decision resulted in sustained and focused attention on older people in Irish national daily newspapers for a period of about one month following the policy announcement.

Two national daily newspapers were sampled for the period in question. Analysis of the newspaper discourses identified particular ways of naming and referencing older people and also revealed distinct and discernible constructions of ageing and age identities. The use of nouns and phrases to name and reference older people positioned them as a distinct demographic group, outside of mainstream society and a latent ageism was available in texts that deployed collective names like 'grannies and granddads' and 'little old ladies'. Older people were constructed with five distinct identity types, namely 'victims', 'frail, infirm and vulnerable', 'radicalised citizens', 'deserving old' and 'undeserving old'.

The analysis of newspaper discourses can uncover taken-for-granted and dominant assumptions and can reveal social constructions of ageing and age identity. The ways that older people are positioned in discourses and the resultant identities that are conferred on them have consequences for older people's behaviour and for the way that other individuals and society behave towards them. Language in use is a powerful means of communicating ideological positions and of establishing social identity and public discourse functions to position social groups in particular ways.

1. Introduction

The programme of research at the National Centre for the Protection of Older People (NCPOP) includes investigations of public perceptions of ageing and elder abuse, including studies into the ways that older people are represented in print media. This study examined newspaper reporting of ageing and age identity in Ireland. The study was based on the assumption that older people are socially positioned in particular ways and that the particular identity that they occupy is actively and socially constructed in conversations and other public discursive contexts, such as media texts.

1.1 Public narratives

Reports on social and health policy typically begin with summary statistics on population demographics, including facts, trends and projections about population age and life expectancy. These descriptions generally contain reference to the fact that the population is ageing and that, due to increasing longevity, in the future older people will constitute a much larger proportion of the overall population. Often these reports present population projections in a tone of alarm and reference is frequently made to the impact that these population trends will have on the provision of health and social services. Reports often mention the challenge of the 'added burden' that an ageing population will have on a country's social services. In contrast, mention of demographic trends for the younger population tend to reflect a tone of optimism related to economic and social advancement.

Beyond the immediate facts of these reports and commentaries, it is evident that a proportion of the population is singled out as a distinct social category by virtue of chronological age alone. This categorical distinction gives rise to particular ways of talking about older people, with public narratives ascribing particular characteristics and attributes to older people. The categorical distinction itself and the particular ways of talking about older people that arise from the distinction constitute a form of public discourse. Aspects of this public discourse and the possible consequences for older people of this discourse are the subject of this study. The study was as a case study based on a single media event associated with older people, using newspaper texts as its main source of data. Using the method of discourse analysis, the study examined the ways that older people are talked about and positioned in Irish society. The study is based on the assumption that newspaper narratives are a window on public attitudes, beliefs and prejudices and are also a mechanism that helps to form public opinion. The study was based on the assumption that older people are socially positioned in particular ways and that the particular identity that they occupy is actively and socially constructed in conversations and other public discursive contexts, such as media texts.

1.2 Aims

The first aim of this study was to describe the ways in which older people are talked about in public print media in Ireland, with particular reference to the ways that ageing and age identity are constructed in newspaper discourses. The study also aimed to examine the consequences of media representations of ageing and age identity for older people, and based on the content of media coverage, to propose guidelines for media reporting in relation to older people.

1.3 Background to the study

Since the Health Act of 2001 (Government of Ireland 2001), all people aged seventy years and older in Ireland had automatic entitlement a non means-tested medical card, giving them free access to the full range of state health services, including free public hospital treatment, free primary health care and free drug treatments. The fiscal effect of this social policy provision had given rise to substantial exchequer costs. In October 2008, the Irish Government published the estimates for its annual budget. Presented in the context of a rapid deterioration in public finances and an impending economic recession, one budgetary measure proposed a modification in the 2001 legislation that would involve the withdrawal of the automatic entitlement and the introduction of a means test to determine eligibility. This action led to an intense focus on older people in the mass media, including television, newspapers and the Internet. This study critically examined an aspect of this media event, the content of newspaper coverage for the period of the intense media focus, and it aimed to uncover how the associated narratives in newspaper texts socially positioned ageing and age identity.

2. Literature review

2.1 Introduction

Age and ageing are theorized within two broad approaches, the scientific and the social constructionist. The former emphasizes biological, psychological and pathological processes of ageing, and dominates public understanding in a disciplinary sense, and the latter places older people into social categories, such as the 'oldest old' (Powell & Wahidin 2008). The ways of theorizing age and ageing give rise to narratives that construct older people in particular ways. For example, the social constructionist approach gives rise to socially-defined expectations of age-related behaviours with which older people are expected to conform and such narratives have consequences for older people (Powell & Wahidin 2008). Hence, when old age is constructed as the declining 'old body', older people tend to get segregated, congregated, and 'managed' in certain spaces, like nursing and retirement homes (Hugman 1999). This discursive construction

of age identity through a body-space arrangement also confers on older people an identity of care dependency that, in turn, places them as 'other to' the mainstream society; in this way, body, living space and identity are linked through discourse (Hugman 1999).

2.2 Ageing and age identity

Madill (2006: 36) writes that identity is a 'contextually variable description that draws on cultural meanings ... and the kind of person one can 'be' is bounded by the acceptable descriptions available at a particular historical-cultural juncture.' Identities are socially constructed through public discourse and discursive constructions of age identities occur in association with other identities, including gender and race, and certain identities get foregrounded, such that one identity gets privileged over another (Ainsworth & Hardy 2007). Social identity is also constructed within discourses of dichotomy, such as young-old, male-female, professional-non-professional, and so forth. Once categorised with reference to their social identity, certain groups get positioned in particular ways through public discourses; hence teenagers, especially urban teenagers, are identified as menacing, coloured people as offenders or victims, and older people as vulnerable, fearful and weak (Pain 2001).

Ascribed social identities also have consequences for the particular group that is represented in public discourses. Ascribed identities give rise to public attitudes and behaviours towards particular social groups and also account for particular social policies and legislation. Moreover, discursive constructions of identity can be deployed to particular ends, including social and political ends; hence legislation on public order, such as ASBOs, can be targeted at 'menacing' urban youth (Pain 2001). Public popular media can act as a powerful means of constructing identity and of positioning certain social groups. In tabloid newspaper texts, groups like the working class tend to be under or over represented, such that they are rendered as either not visible and unworthy of recognition or as hypervisible and singled out as objects of disdain, ridicule and fear (Moon & Rolison 1998, cited in Richardson 1998). Such discourse can serve as a strategy not just for representing the particular social group of interest, but of permitting them to be treated in certain ways.

As the subject of academic research, older people are further positioned according to the particular explanatory and analytical framework that predominates in the research field at a given time. Hence, the functionalist approach, exemplified in disengagement theory and activity theory, gives rise to particular narratives and particular research questions (Powell 2001). For example, disengagement theory views ageing as a gradual

withdrawal from productive life and as a series of losses. Despite the decline in this theory of ageing, older people continue to be constructed as frail and as representing a disproportionate drain on resources, in spite of the evidence that most are active, healthy and continue to contribute to the economy (Harbison & Morrow 1998).

Competing constructions of older people as frail-healthy, dependent-independent, or as burden-self-sufficient are evident in policy debates and, in their essence, represent institutional ageism (Harbison & Morrow 1998). Biggs (2005) points to a tendency to re-describe ageing as a time of activity, social engagement and productivity, rather than of decline and dependency, such that older people are no longer bound by strict social and biological reference points. Biggs (2005) also points to evidence of tensions between 'distinctiveness' trends (discernible differences) and 'uniformity' (life course uniformity) trends and cautions that, taken together, the freedoms and risks associated with contemporary ageing mean that older adults may increasingly experience multiple pressures on identities that were previously considered stable and predictable.

2.2.1 Ageing and age identity in discourses

Identities are socially constructed and older people are constructed as a particular social category. While the social identity arising from the categorical label 'old age' might appear natural and obvious, it is 'contingent, unstable and the product of particular historical circumstances' (Hall cited in Ainsworth & Hardy 2007: 269). Moreover, discursive constructions of age identities are often with reference to the discursive practices of the particular age group in question; in the case of older people, social construction is often with reference to health and social services utilisation, thereby giving rise to an identity of dependency (Ainsworth & Hardy 2007). Coupland (2009a: 855) draws attention to the interconnectedness of age identity and other socially constructed identities: 'age identity is not separable from other social dimensions in which identities are constructed or attributed, such as gender, sexuality, class, culture, religion, nationality and profession.'

For older people, selfhood is shaped by the ways that others view them and act towards them (Thompson 1998). The experience of self in old age is thus determined in great part by the ways that others view the older person. By analyzing constructions of the older worker in public policy texts associated with a public parliamentary inquiry into the older worker in Australia, Ainsworth and Hardy (2007) demonstrated how textual constructions of the older worker privileged the masculine version and thereby suppressed the female version of older worker identities, and they showed how these discursive constructions privilege the older male as culturally sympathetic and meriting

state support. Powell and Biggs (2001) showed how medical narratives concerned with decline and deterioration in old age constitute discourses that function to 'colonize definitions afforded to the ageing process' and illustrate how professional power has dominated social relationships with older people (Powell 2001: 124). Similarly, Pickard (2009) examined how new expertise in the care of older people is constructed around the discourse of case management and risk, and showed how, within this discourse, new subject positions are created in the form of older people as being at risk of emergency hospital admission. Typically, in language associated with policy on ageing, professionals and older people are positioned in an unequal power relationship.

2.2.2 Ageing and age identity in newspaper discourses

Research into media discourses concerning older people reveals both positive stereotypes, like old age as the 'golden years of a leisure-filled existence' (Nussbaum & Coupland 2005: 238), and negative stereotypes, like older people as frail (Groombridge, cited in Murphy 2004) and cognitively impaired (Miller *et al.* 1999). In popular mass media discourses, older people are largely invisible relative to their demographic presence in the real world (Robinson & Skill 1995, Murphy 2004), with older women, in particular, being underrepresented relative to their proportion in the general population (Murphy 2004), and a white, male and relatively affluent version of older identity tends to dominate discourses in popular television (Robinson & Skill 1995).

Bonnesen and Burgess (2004: 125) analysed instances of the phrase 'senior moment' in newspapers and concluded that its widespread use indicates an ageist attribute and constituted an example of ageist stereotyping. In an analysis of newspaper reporting of older people in Ireland conducted for the period July to September 2002, Murphy (2004) reported a lack of discussion on the subject of intergenerational relationships and responsibilities, the absence of any editorial comment on ageing issues, the scripting of sensationalised ageist headlines in tabloid newspapers, the exclusion of older people from advertisements and the almost invisibility of older women.

2.3 Ageism

Ageism involves thinking that propagates stereotyping and negative attitudes towards older people. Ageism is evident not just within the wider society, but also among health professionals' discourses associated with health policy and planning and health service delivery and practices. Institutional ageism in health care systems marginalizes older people in relation to their level of involvement in and their choice and control over the services that they receive (Milisen *et al.* 2001).

On the subject of institutional prejudices in health care provision, Reed and Clarke (1999: 208) write: 'older people are increasingly viewed as a 'problem' whose needs challenge the resources of care services ... [and accordingly] western healthcare is dominated by an orientation to identified problems, the minimizing of physical risk or harm, and a reductionalist approach to problem solving.' The idea that older people place 'increased demands' on the health care system and represent 'a burden on scarce health care resources' reveals an latent prejudice against older people that carries the assumption that they are somehow less deserving of health services than their younger counterparts. The representation of the older person as a 'bed-blocker' in the acute hospital system is a particularly extreme yet prevalent example of the prejudice that seems to imply that acute hospitals are not for the use of the older population.

Ageist prejudice among health professionals fails to recognize that the utilization of health services is positively related to increasing age that is, in turn, positively related to the increased incidence of chronic diseases (Milisen *et al.* 200). Such prejudice is likely to continue as long as health professionals hold and express stereotypical views about older people in general and is related, in part, to the fact that most health professionals' encounters with older people are with those in receipt of care (Hugman 1999). Negative attitudes toward older people and a lack of knowledge about ageing combine to form 'an extremely pessimistic picture of older adults and the aging process' (Bonnesen & Burgess (2004: 125). Ageist prejudice and its attendant approach in care systems 'is predicated on the negative and nihilistic attitudes that are held throughout society about older people and the effectiveness of therapeutic intervention' (Reed & Clarke 1999: 208).

2.3.1 Consequences

Ageist attitudes give rise to expectations of and consequences for older people, including institutional discrimination and the creation of a culture that creates an environment conducive to the development of elder abuse (HSE 2008). The continued prevalence of ageism in modern developed societies, at both individual and institutional levels, represents a significant barrier to achieving an 'age-friendly society' (NCAOP 2005).

Older people's responses to ageist stereotyping may be to internalize the same stereotypes and expectations, such that they experience low self-esteem and concern at being a burden (Thompson 1998). This 'internalized oppression' may, in turn, result in the older person being rendered unable to meet the challenge of living in old age and preparing for eventual death (Thompson 1998). Low self worth and marginalization can also result from infantilizing attitudes and behaviours towards older people.

Considering the consequences that can arise from perpetuating assumptions about health and social needs and their uncritical adoption in care systems, Reed and Clarke (1999: 212) write:

Here we see, then, a process of society identifying and defining an ideological position about care, and professional groups reacting to that pressure by shifting their professional beliefs about need and developing services to meet that need. Without any explicit mechanism for accessing the perspective of the service user, the profession resorts to themselves as definers of that need and service provision. Thus we have rigid normative views imposed on a client group with no assessment of the appropriateness of that care for them.

Bytheway (1995: 119) writes that 'old age is a cultural concept, a construction that has certain utility in sustaining ageism within societies that need scapegoats.' Ageism has the effect of dehumanising older people and representing them as 'powerless, passive victims within the homogenous group of "the elderly"' (Thompson 1998: 704–5).

3. Research design

3.1 Introduction

Using the method of critical discourse analysis this study examined one key public event that gave rise to particular discourses related to older people. The public event concerned the proposal by the Irish Government in late 2008 to withdraw the automatic entitlement to a free medical card for people aged seventy years and over and gave rise to sustained media attention, which constituted a media event and thereby offered a body of rich naturally-occurring data, which could be subjected to analysis.

3.1 Critical discourse analysis

What constitutes legitimate knowledge is relative and not absolute. What is actually occurring in the social world may be revealed by exposing the ideological basis of taken-for-granted and dominant assumptions and by revealing the hidden, underlying structures on which they are based. The means for revealing such hidden structures is critical discourse analysis. Critical discourse analysis examines any phenomenon that is written or spoken about and takes texts, including naturally occurring texts, as data and can reveal how particular accounts of reality are presented as the 'true' version, so that they implicitly undermine any possible alternative versions.

Language acts as a powerful vehicle of representation, constructing versions of social reality and achieving particular social objectives and it has a constitutive role (Nikander 2009). Critical discourse analysis provided a broad analytical framework for this study and took naturally occurring texts as its data. Using newspaper discourses associated

with a media event concerning older people, the study was concerned with how the texts were constructed to produce meaning and how the language in use was deployed to construct particular versions of the world, including variable, inconsistent, self-interested and persuasive versions (Fealy & McNamara 2007). This entailed going beyond the content of the text in order to lay open to critical inspection assumptions and inconsistencies in language (Madill 2006). In this way the study aimed to uncover connections between the language in use and the way that the language functioned to communicate ideological positions and to establish social identity (Taylor 2001).

3.2.1 Subject position

In discourse analysis, subject position is defined as 'a construct drawn from perspectives viewing subjectivity and identity as linguistic constructions' (Madill 2006: 36). Different subject positions are linked to shared, culturally-available linguistic and grammatical resources used to characterise and evaluate objects and events (Edley 2001) and the tacit, taken-for-granted, sense-making frameworks to which they give rise. These frameworks and their associated subject positions can be abstracted from narrative accounts generated in the course of qualitative research or in other texts, such as those constituting public policy utterances and media reportage and commentary. The discourse analyst is not so much concerned with what a particular text means, but what it can be *taken* to mean as a result of the frameworks it draws upon and the often-implicit subject positions it makes available (Madill 2006: 37). Discourses provide subject positions through which identities are produced; hence identities are the product of particular forms of action or 'discursive work' that can be tracked in linguistic data (Coupland 2009a). Particular identities are actively constructed in conversations between people and in other discursive contexts, such as public media discourses. Coupland (2009a: 855) writes: 'A discourse-analytic approach assumes that identities are complexes of meaning potential, waiting to be triggered or activated or made salient under particular circumstances and in the flow of social life and social interaction.'

3.3 Data collection and analysis

The study analysed the use of language in newspaper discourses surrounding the medical card for older people affair in Irish public policy. A purposive sample of national newspapers published in the one-month period (12 October–13 November 2008) immediately following the announcement of the proposed welfare policy change constituted the data set for the study. Selected on the basis that they should represent a broad national readership of mixed demographic profile, *The Irish Independent*, a broadsheet newspaper, and *The Irish Daily Star*, a tabloid newspaper, were examined to

retrieve all copy associated with the subject of concern, including reports, commentaries and editorials.

Data analysis drew on the work of Fairclough, Wetherell and Gee. Fairclough (2003) focuses on the detail of interactions and on analysis of the structuring principles that give rise to particular texts and their effects in constructing particular versions of the social world. Wetherell (1998) is concerned with identity construction and with uncovering hidden relations of power and control in discourses, and analytic concepts such as subject positions (Edley 2001, Edley & Wetherell 1997) are deployed to investigate the ways that individuals are positioned by, and effected through, historically and culturally specific discursive regimes. Gee (2005: 20) provides finely-honed 'tools of inquiry' that help to gain an analytic purchase on textual data as well as a series of specific questions with which to analyse the specific building tasks performed by texts. For Gee, language is thought of as constructing several areas of 'reality', including identities, relationships and activities.

In analysing the texts, the focus was on how particular versions of the world are represented and what that particular version implied about reality. When accounting for the analytical methods and procedures used, we avoided setting out procedural steps to be followed, instead offering textual exemplars to illustrate the application of the tools of inquiry (Gee 1999; Richardson 2007) and the analysis drew on Gee's (1999) idea of the building blocks or 'tasks' of language in use. Gee (1999: 97) writes that 'language ... simultaneously reflects and constructs the situation or context in which it is used' and language-in-use is a tool that builds reality. He proposes that there are seven such tasks in the function of language, namely 1) building significance, 2) building activities, 3) building identities, 4) building relationships, 5) building politics, 6) building connections, and 7) building sign systems and knowledge. For the purpose of the study, our analysis focused on the task of 'building identities', one of the several tasks of language in use that both reflect and construct a situation and build reality (Gee 1999).

While our method decries setting out procedural steps to be followed, a brief account of analytical steps follows. In our analysis of the newspaper texts we conducted a preliminary examination of the use of words and phrases to name and reference older people. We then conducted a more depth analysis of the texts for evidence of common and abiding phrases and expressions that writers deployed when writing about the topic in hand. From this we were able to elicit particular recurring linguistic devices, such as the use of metaphors and rhetoric. We were also alert to the ageing discourses at work and particular emergent subject positions and age identities that the text might reveal

that the texts might render up and in this way we were able to uncover particular identities that the discourses made available.

4. Findings

4.1 Introduction

Two national newspapers were sampled for the period 12 October to 13 November 2008. Analysis of the sampled national daily newspapers identified a total of 227 items, 169 from the broadsheet and 58 from the tabloid newspaper. Items included reportage, commentary items and combinations of both. The majority of the items concerned the substantive topic of the proposal to withdraw automatic entitlement of older people to a medical card and many of the items incorporated commentary along with the reportage or constituted commentary pieces in their entirety. Of the total number of items uncovered, 15 were categorised as editorial or commentary articles. Items also included letters to the editor.

The content of much of the reportage concerned the details of the proposed welfare policy change and a protest march by older people held in Dublin soon after the announcement of the policy change. The tone of much of the writing was anger, which was directed at the Government, accompanied by expressions of sympathy for and solidarity with the older population affected by the policy decision. One week into the media event, on 21 October, the Irish Government decided not to proceed with the measure as proposed in the initial draft legislation and instead proposed a means test, the result of which was to effectively reverse automatic entitlement for approximately five per cent of the total population in question. While the content of reportage necessarily changed, the content of commentary remained one of broad derision at and admonishment of the Government for its treatment of older people. Journalists and commentators liberally deployed rhetorical language and drew on literary references to characterise the decision and to represent a beleaguered older population. In the media event, older people were the focus of attention and had a real, if short-lived, presence in public discourse.

4.2 Positioning older people through language

Various nouns and phrases were employed to name and reference older people within the texts; writers variously referred to older people as 'older folk', 'senior citizens' 'the pensioners', 'the over-70s', 'the retired' and 'grannies and granddads'. One writer referred to older people collectively as 'little old ladies' (II 18/10/08) and the phrase '[the] old and vulnerable' was frequently used. Setting older people and politicians in diametric opposition, one reporter contrasted the country's '[heroic] veterans' with its

[feeble political] leaders' (II 23/10/08). Another referred to 'Ireland's proud senior citizens' (IDS 23/10/08). Older people's identity was also constructed with reference to their offspring; reporters variously referred to 'our elderly parents' (IDS 17/10/08) and '[our] ageing parents' (II 17/10/08). Older people's children were referred to as the 'working population' and, by definition, the productive population. With older people threatened with the loss of the free medical card, the working population fretted for the health of their parents (II 17/10/08).

A total of five identities were available either directly or through implication in the texts. Older people were positioned as: 'victims', 'frail, infirm and vulnerable', 'radicalised citizens', 'the deserving old' and 'the undeserving old'. The range of words, phrases and expressions used to discuss and describe older people not only conferred on them particular identities, but also, it will be argued, revealed a latent ageist stereotyping.

4.2.1 Victims

The decision to remove older people's automatic entitlement to a medical card for persons aged seventy years and over evoked an immediate response from journalists, commentators and opposition politicians. Reportage and commentary placed older people as hapless and undeserving victims of a cruel act perpetrated by an uncaring and mean-spirited Government. Older people were cast as 'vulnerable Irish citizens' (IDS 21/10/08) and 'easy targets for ... [the] cruel cutbacks' (IDS 23/10/08) and the policy decision was likened to 'an evil measure to wrestle medical cards from little old ladies' (II 18/10/08) and to 'stealing a bottle from a baby in the pram' (II 20/10/08).

Politicians were the subject of much opprobrium from journalists for their role in perpetrating a 'cruel attack on the elderly' (IDS 21/10/08). Politicians were described as 'vile misers' (IDS 17/10/08) and likened to 'the lowliest form of cowardly predator[s]' for perpetrating 'a most vicious and underhand attack' on older Irish citizens (IDS 17/10/08). The policy decision to 'cruelly' take away the medical card from older people (15/10/08) was variously described as 'Scrooge-like unnecessary ... [and] cruel treatment' (II 17/10/08), 'draconian' (II 22/10/08), 'mean-minded ... [and] soul-less' (IDS 16/10/08), 'callous, cold-blooded cruelty' (IDS 17/10/08), and 'an unmerciful attack on old people' (IDS 15/10/08).

The Government action was portrayed as 'political mugging' (II 20/10/08) and it demonstrated 'contempt for fair play and decency' (IDS 15/10/08). One public official who opposed the welfare policy decision described the Government action as 'morally indefensible [and] grossly unfair' (II 23/10/08). An opposition politician characterised

the action as 'deplorable' and 'despicable' and admonished the Government, which, he declared, should be 'hiding in shame' on account of its decision (II 16/10/08). However, politicians who expressed opposition to the Government decision were depicted by one journalist as 'preying off the fears of vulnerable people for their own selfish political gain' (II 23/10/08). The *Irish Daily Star* newspaper asked rhetorically: 'What exactly have our elderly citizens done to deserve such cruel and spiteful treatment from the merciless muggers shamelessly masquerading as our political servants?' (IDS 17/10/08).

Beyond the rhetoric, the idea of universal free medical care for older people was both explicitly and implicitly viewed as a laudable social policy; one commentary piece bemoaned the reversal of the policy, which had been introduced just six years previously: 'For one short, brief glorious period in our history we had universal medical care for our elderly – until it was cruelly, callously and unnecessarily killed off by this Government' (IDS 22/10/08). The Minister for Finance was entreated to 'act immediately today and save our elderly any more anguish than you have already inflicted on them' (IDS 21/10/08). Another commentator remarked: 'How we treat our old is a reflection of the core of our Irish civilisation' (II 16/10/08).

4.2.2 Frail, infirm and vulnerable

In the newspaper texts, older people were constructed as frail and infirm or at risk of illness and infirmity. One reporter wrote of the concern of the medical profession for older people's health in the event of them losing their entitlement to a medical card:

Doctors have warned that the stress directly induced by this new regime is likely to exacerbate existing ailments in elderly people, or even bring on new ones (II 17/10/08).

Another wrote of the need to 'take into account that over-70s patients require more care because they can have several ailments and need more doctors' time' (II 25/10/08). In the view of one reporter, the threat of the loss of the free medical card had left people over 70 feeling 'very hurt and bruised' and the same reporter remarked: '[and] we all know that bruises in older people take a long time to heal' (II 29/10/08).

Writing about older people attending a rally in Dublin to protest against the new policy, one reporter described 'soberly-dressed people in rain proof anoraks, minding their rheumatism against the chill' (II 22/10/08). As they arrived for the protest rally, some older people were portrayed as 'striding along briskly up the street, others in wheelchairs while more struggled on sticks.' Expressing concern about the wellbeing of the older people attending the rally, another reporter asked rhetorically: 'Who will be

responsible if one or more of our senior citizens is injured or worse due to their attendance at this protest?' (IDS 21/10/08). Referring to the financial circumstances that gave rise to the proposed budgetary measure, one writer characterised the parlous state of the Irish banks as being 'even more frail than many of the over-70s' (II 21/10/08). Another expressed the fear that older people might 'not last that long without the peace of mind of a medical card' (IDS 21/10/08). One reporter implicitly associated old age with ineptitude, remarking that the 'worry about filling in even more [means-test] forms' would 'prevent many qualifying older folk from applying for what has been an automatic entitlement' (II 16/10/08).

In the discourses associated with the media event much of the newspaper copy also positioned older people as vulnerable; one writer observed that, arising out of the proposed change in the welfare policy, 'one of the most vulnerable sectors of society' had now become 'very frightened about the future' (II 16/10/08). Rather than protecting 'the vulnerable [old]', the Government had chosen to target them (II 23/10/08). Being 'old, vulnerable, [and] in many cases, infirm' (IDS 17/10/08), older people were presented as the least able to resist the change in welfare policy, which would 'make life more difficult for [them]' (II 20/10/08). Although writing in a sympathetic tone on the threat to older people, one writer referred to the growing population of older people and the presumed attendant 'burden' that they and their carers constituted:

People are living longer, there are more of them, and ... the burden not only of caring for them but of caring for carers is everyday becoming more onerous' (II 20/10/08).

4.2.3 Radicalised citizens on the march

A protest rally by older people in Dublin, held to coincide with a parliamentary debate on the welfare policy decision, was widely reported and attracted substantial additional copy in commentary items and editorials. Most reports of the event were accompanied by commentary and the rally was implicitly characterised as an anomaly; one reporter observed that older people 'would never, ever, have dreamt of ever taking part in a public protest outside their national parliament' (IDS 21/10/08). Some reporters appeared to derive delight in reporting what seemed to them to be a strange and unusual public spectacle.

Mythical and romantic metaphors were deployed to characterise the event and its principal protagonists, including metaphors of old brave warriors and old revolutionaries; those who participated in the rally were variously referred to as 'this noble group of warriors' (II 22/10/08), the 'Grey Brigade [and] ... the new heroes of Ireland' (IDS

23/10/08) and one commentary item was headed 'politicians feel wrath of silver revolutionaries' (II 22/10/08). Ireland's 'proud senior citizens' (IDS 23/10/08) had 'descended on [the] capital [city]' (IDS 21/10/08) to take part in the protest rally, arriving 'in their droves by bus, train and Zimmer-frame, a raging winter-coloured sea of grey and white' (II 23/10/08). For the thousands of pensioners who 'besieged' the parliament buildings in Dublin (IDS 25/10/08) their weapons of assault were 'Zimmer frames' (IDS 30/10/09) and 'Werther's Originals' (IDS 25/10/09).

In a commentary item on older people's response to the proposed welfare policy change, one reporter referred to 'the sleeping tiger' that had been awakened, and closed the piece with the remark: 'here's to the new radicalism in Irish life thanks to our grey panther movement!' (II 23/10/08). Writing in the same edition of the same newspaper, another commentator observed: '[today] we saw senior citizens' pester power in action – its emergence a triumph for democracy' (II 23/10/08). The 'gathering tsunami of anger' was reported to have had caused panic among Government politicians (II 18/10/08) and the Government was warned that it should 'never mess with the elderly as they are older, wiser and far more clued-in than they have ever been given credit for' (IDS 23/10/08). One reporter wrote of 'elderly constituents' who would have no problem rejecting the government parties at election time (IDS 21/10/08).

4.2.4 The deserving old

The tone of much newspaper commentary was sympathy for older people who had already paid their dues, had contributed to economic progress throughout their working lives and were now entitled to reap the rewards for their years of labour. Older people were positioned as 'hard-pressed and very deserving pensioners' (IDS 21/10/08) who had earned their automatic entitlement to a medical card, since they had contributed to society as taxpayers throughout their productive working lives; they have 'paid their dues and more' (II 23/10/08) and had 'made sacrifices for this nation' (IDS 17/10/09). In its action the Irish Government had deprived its 'elderly the few bob they have in their pensions and the few bob they have managed to save over a lifetime of hard, honest work' (IDS 17/10/08). Writing that older people had 'earned their medical cards' one reporter commented:

These [older] people stayed in Ireland and offered up their taxes at a time when the State was limping along ... they paid for the good times many of us have enjoyed. Now the Government has the insensitivity to ask them to shell out again (II 23/10/08).

Politicians were entreated to 'reverse this decision and restore the medical card to our most deserving citizens' (IDS 17/10/08) and one commentator declared: 'Instead of

being tormented like this our elderly should be pampered and left to enjoy their twilight years in comfort and security' (IDS17/10/08).

One writer asked rhetorically: 'What exactly have our elderly citizens done to deserve such cruel and spiteful treatment?' (IDS 17/10/08). With the proposal to remove the entitlement to a free medical card older people were positioned as the victims of unnecessary 'criminal' harassment by the State, which they had 'served so well for so long' (II 16/10/08). They had 'built this country in leaner times' (II 22/10/08) and had 'worked hard all their lives and ... made a valuable contribution ...to our society and country' (II 22/10/08). One commentator wrote: 'Upon the shoulders of our elderly parents we stood to build a modern [Irish] economy' (IDS 17/10/08) and another remarked: 'instead of their contribution over long decades being recognised ... our pensioners are being treated with callous contempt' and observed that 'our senior citizens deserve better respect and gratitude from the State [and should be] left to enjoy medical cards at the end of their hard working lives' (II 22/10/08).

The views of national and local politicians were widely reported in the course of the media event. One public official stated that 'people who reached the age of 70 deserved the gratitude of the State' (II 21/10/08) and another defended older people's entitlement to their just rewards in old age:

These are the very people who paid up to 60pc income tax during the tough economic times of the 1980s. They have never really got the chance to enjoy the benefits from the boom years of the Celtic Tiger (II 20/10/08).

4.2.5 The undeserving old

Despite the prevailing strength of sympathy for older people's predicament, a small number of commentary items categorised older people as arrogant and privileged and undeserving of the automatic entitlement to a free medical card. One writer criticised the Government policy that had initially introduced the automatic entitlement to a free medical card and berated a group of angry 'well-to-do middle class' older people for protesting at the threatened loss of the entitlement:

We saw that demographic group (older people) in all its self-absorbed, self-glorifying self-pity [protesting] ... [and] singing – without a trace of irony, or historical awareness – the anthem of the US civil rights movement of their youth, 'We Shall Overcome' (II 23/10/08).

In the writer's view this 'bunch of well-to-do pensioners' was deciding economic policy for the entire nation. Representing older people as retaining their wealth at the expense of the younger population, the same commentator wrote of the spectre of 'a grisly

gerontocratic nightmare in which the young of the nation must surrender whatever wealth and hope that they might have to ensure the already rich and greyly querulous retain all their assets, unto the grave.'

Another commentator remarked on the fact that the older people who protested at the threatened loss of the medical card were either among the small percentage of older people who would lose their automatic entitlement to a medical card or were those among the majority who would not lose their entitlement. In any event, the writer observed, the protestors at the Dublin rally 'gave a lesson in the creation and management of a bandwagon' and, in the writer's view, confirmed 'the calibre of person we're dealing with' (II 1/11/08). One reporter observed that, along with students, pensioners were the only group that could afford to take a whole day off work to attend a protest rally (IDS 25/10/08).

4.3 Summary of findings

The analysis of the newspaper discourses revealed particular ways of naming and referencing older people that identified them as a distinct demographic social group and as *other* to mainstream society. This was evident in the use of collective names associated with older people, like 'the pensioners' and 'the over-70s'. In addition, the use of phrases like 'grannies and granddads' and 'little old ladies' to name older people revealed a latent ageism in the texts that we examined. The texts also revealed the construction of older people's identities within five distinct identity types; these were older people as 'victims', as 'frail, infirm and vulnerable', as 'radicalised citizens', as 'deserving old' and as 'undeserving old'.

The newspaper discourses made available subject positions that produced identities, which, together and collectively, placed older people outside of the mainstream of society. This identity of *otherness* was evident in the way that texts assumed homogeneity with reference to older people's health, capabilities, social needs, dispositions and wishes. Representing older people as frail, vulnerable and deserving of welfare support and with reference to health and social services utilisation conferred on them an identity of dependence, which also supported the identity of otherness. The identity of otherness was also evident in reportage and commentary concerned with older people's engagement in a public protest march; many writers implicitly wrote of the event as novel or improbable.

5. Discussion

5.1 Introduction

Discourse is 'language in use' and print media provide readily accessible and manageable textual data with which to conduct critical discourse analysis. This study examined discursive formations of ageing and age identity in Irish print media. Given the dearth of discussion of ageing issues in newspapers (Murphy 2004), the intense and sustained attention on older people in the single media event under review in this study seemed somewhat ironic. Nevertheless, the media event presented a case study for discourse analysis and the newspaper texts associated with the event revealed ways in which older people are positioned in Irish public discourses.

5.2 Newspapers as discourse

The idiom in which a public discourse is conducted gives rise to particular types of narratives, which in turn, function to position particular social groups with particular identities. By examining newspaper discourses associated with a single media event, this study aimed to reveal public constructions of ageing and age identity in contemporary Irish society, including particular subject positions that construct and sustain particular identities for older people. The newspaper texts offered versions of reality that were linked to a particular context in which the language in the texts was used (Madill 2006). Newspapers offer a window on public opinion, culture, politics and social life (Fairclough 1995), are influential in setting the agenda for public discourse and play a part in forming attitudes (Murphy 2004). Hence, the language in newspaper discourses is rarely neutral since it is directed at *doing* something and is situated in a particular context or social setting and, consequently, may be presented using tacit discursive strategies to construct public discourses in particular ways (Richardson 1998).

The focus on a specific media event that gave rise to intense debate over a relatively short time span permitted access to the ways that various discourses were used to construct specific repertoires for positioning the self (the writer of a particular newspaper item) and others (older people) in particular ways. It also permitted access to the ways in which these discourses were used for thinking about and interpreting the event of concern. In mass media societies, media coverage of events constitutes an important part of ongoing conversations between various discourses, which both inform and are informed by taken-for-granted and often competing repertoires for making sense of the world (Wetherell 1998; Gee 2005; Frewin, Pond & Tuffin 2009). Journalists' selection of topics and their representation are not simply reflections of reality; rather events and identities are constructed through their values, social languages and interpretive repertoires and those of other stakeholders, such as spokespersons for the

agencies that represent older people's interests, Government and opposition politicians and older persons themselves.

By focusing on choices of words and phrases, metaphors, anecdotes and quotations – choices that were rarely value neutral – we were able to identify consistent discursive patterns and examine the work that these patterns performed in appealing to particular constituencies, engendering emotions and reinforcing or resisting dominant discourses. By examining what was emphasised and underplayed and what was included and excluded, it was possible to uncover the discursive work performed by particular reports, opinion pieces and other commentaries (Connolly-Ahern & Broadway 2009). In a more general sense, our examination of the media event revealed that despite the intense focus of attention on older people and their economic position, and similar to Murphy's (2004) earlier analysis of Irish newspaper copy concerning older people, there was little in-depth analysis of critical issues around ageing.

5.3 Identities

Gee (1999: 97) writes: 'language ... simultaneously reflects and constructs the situation or context in which it is used'. Language is the tool that builds 'reality'. Just as individuals and groups use language to fashion their own identities, so they can also fashion others' identities. Coupland (2009a: 856) writes that 'people are simultaneously the *products* and the *producers* of discourse' (original emphasis).

This study was concerned with particular ways in which older people are positioned (Teo 2000; Richardson 2007) and a particular focus of the textual analysis was on ageing and age identities. From our analysis we found that older people's identities were constructed within one of five types, viz. older people as 'victims', 'frail, infirm and vulnerable', 'radicalised citizens', 'deserving old' and 'undeserving old'. These identities were interrelated textually, such that some were contingent on others. Thus, for example, the policy decision that gave rise to the newspaper discourses resulted in older people being positioned as the hapless and helpless victims of a cruel and unnecessary act and this victimhood was contingent on their frailty and vulnerability. Collectively all five identities gave rise to an identity of otherness (Hugman 1999), an identity that was also available in the particular ways that older people were named and referenced.

5.3.1 Identity as other

The phrases used to name and reference older people can have a significant impact on the way that they are viewed, both in terms of identifying their associated group and establishing the relationship between the namer and the named (Richardson 2007). In

the newspaper discourses examined, journalists chose and deployed particular collectivized phrases, such as 'the pensioners' or 'the over-70s', to place older people into a particular categorical group. Such naming and referencing carry differences in their denoted (explicit) and connoted (implicit) meanings and perform particular functions within texts (Richardson 2007); in this instance they position older people as not only a distinct demographic category (denoted) but as a group outside of or different to the average citizen (connoted). The texts also revealed an assumed homogeneity with reference to older people's health, capabilities, social needs, dispositions and wishes.

Older people's identity as 'other to' (Hugman 1999) was explicitly and implicitly available throughout the texts, both in the collective nouns deployed to name and reference older people – they were the 'pensioners', 'the retired' and 'the over-70s' – and in the way that diversity was ignored to position them as a homogenous group, infirm, welfare dependent and improbable radicals. In conveying an identity of otherness (Biggs 2005), this construction constituted a discourse of opposition, what Hugman (1999: 204) refers to as the 'us/them' discourse. This representation of ageing implies a particular configuration of ascribed attributes, behaviours and dispositions, including withdrawal from productive work, bodily decline and dependency on welfare and/or on care giving. It also constructs a discontinuity between past and present identities, creating a temporal rupture in which older people's past identities are marginalized and unacknowledged; hence there is no reference to the older individual's former (pre-retirement) identity in the construction of present identity. In addition, the use of the phrase 'our elderly parents' constructed older people's identity with reference to their offspring; their children were referred to as the 'working population' and this, by implication, rendered older people as the unproductive population.

The use of naming and referencing phrases like 'grannies and granddads' and 'little old ladies' revealed a latent ageism in the texts. Derogative opinions of older people can influence the use of age-based attributions of older people's behaviours (Bonnesen & Burgess 2004). The idea of 'old age' gives rise to a particular public assumption that being old is a life stage, disconnected from a person's past and in which there is no future, and this dominant ideological assumption is both misleading and oppressive, since 'old age' is a lengthy life period (Thompson 1998).

5.3.2 Frail and infirm

The idea that older people are frail and likely to become infirm and dependent dominated textual constructions of older people in the newspaper texts examined. Murphy (2004: 32) similarly reported a suggestion of weakness, vulnerability and

feebleness in the way that older people were written about in Irish newspapers, with a tendency 'to portray negative images of older people as ill and dependent, and a burden on public resources.' This identity as 'infirm and dependent' not only associated older people with a declining body, but also conferred on them implied associations with incapacity and incompetence and hence a biological account of ageing that was 'deficit-oriented, decremental and deterministic' (Coupland 2009b: 954). For example, older people were not really up to the challenge of extensive form-filling or marching in the cold. Similar to the erroneous assumption that many older people live in residential care facilities, this construction represents a normative view of older age, and one that is at variance with the reality (Hugman 1999). The proposition that they might be healthy, self-reliant and capable of autonomy in the way they live their lives was largely absent in the discourses examined.

Older people's identity as 'the deserving old' positioned them as a distinct group meriting state welfare support and this identity was especially available in the texts that spoke of their past contribution in having 'paid their dues'. Just as age identity can construct older people as 'culturally sympathetic' (Ainsworth & Hardy 2007), analysis of the newspaper discourses revealed a construction of older Irish people as appealing and favourable for the most part; they were to be 'pampered and left to enjoy their twilight years in comfort and security.' Nevertheless, in some commentaries older people were referred to as 'burden' on state services and as a well-to-do and privileged social group, revealing a less than sympathetic construction. This identity as the 'undeserving old' might feature more prominently as a subject position in a post-Celtic tiger Ireland, in which all State welfare payments, including child benefits and pensions of younger workers, are rendered vulnerable in a time to fiscal rectitude.

In public discourses, older people tend to be represented as vulnerable, fearful and weak (Pain 2001). With the identity of beleaguered and helpless victims of the powerful state, older people were positioned as vulnerable to further infirmity and were positioned as being forced to become radicalized in the face of the threat to their income and health; they were now a mighty force of grey warriors on the march. However, when they protested on the streets, acting in the way that most other social and generational groups tend to act in situations of adversity, their behaviour was represented as anomalous and as an object of amusement. Their irregular behaviour was presented textually as radical action from a new radical group, but while they might be radical citizens on the march, these 'silver revolutionaries' marching with their Zimmer frames and 'minding their rheumatism against the chill' were never really about to tear down

the gates. While they were 'a raging sea of protestors', sub textually there could be no implied threat from 'soberly-dressed', 'grey ... white' and 'frail' people.

5.3.2 Deviant behaviour

Older people achieving seemingly great feats of courage or skill are often celebrated in the public media (Hugman 1999); witness the typical embodiments of the high-achieving older person in the parachuting pensioner or the silver (web) surfer. Irish newspapers similarly portray older individuals as high achievers who defy expected behaviour for their age, such as the 'granny' motorcyclist who 'gets her kicks on Route 66' (Murphy 2004). From the newspaper discourses examined here, it is now possible to add a new variant to the list, that of the grey warrior. In protesting, older people were represented as a power for change; however, since language is both representational and constitutive (Fealy & McNamara 2006, Nikander 2009), older people were infirm and vulnerable and dependent on state welfare and were, ultimately, not empowered. Constructed in this way, their entitlement to a medical card could not be disputed, particularly in a society with a highly developed state welfare system.

However, in publicly protesting, older people were deviant in not acting according to this ascribed role, and this was evident in the way that some writers represented the protest as anomalous. Here a paradox is created. In stepping outside the strict social and biological reference points of ageing (Biggs 2005) to engage in a public protest, the 'deserving old' were placing themselves as part of the public mainstream, thereby rendering their case for free entitlement to state services as less tenable. While their claim to free entitlement was strengthened in the way that the texts spoke of Zimmer frames, wheelchairs and walking sticks, their non-conformity to expectations of role behavior risked weakening their case. In this connection, Biggs (2005) writes of the inherent tension between the conformity and distinctiveness of identities that places older people in a difficult position; emphasizing their identity as part of the public mainstream threatens the entitlements and freedoms that come with pensioner status.

5.4 Ageism

Through the newspaper texts, the discursive construction of ageing and age identity not only conferred on older people a particular range of identities, but also revealed a latent and abiding ageism in the texts. The ageism inherent in constructions of older people as frail and dependent (Harbison & Morrow 1998) was available in the discourses of collective naming of older people as 'pensioners', 'veterans', 'retired' and 'the over-70s'. Naming older people in this way conferred on them a uniform identity of implied dependency. Similarly, naming them collectively as 'older folk', 'grannies and granddads'

and 'little old ladies' implied a more cosy and attractive social identity, but one that, notwithstanding the soft-focused text, was essentially, if sub-textually, ageist.

The ageism inherent in the constructions of older people as dependent was also revealed in the ways that the newspaper texts characterized older people as victims of the cruel act of withdrawing the automatic entitlement to a free medical card. Ageism is endemic in Western societies and, while older people may choose particular activities, like recreating with their own age cohort, in ageist societies such choice is often imposed by younger people (Hugman 1999). In pointing to the view of some critical gerontologists that a more rounded view of 'normal' old age should replace the focus on need and negativity, Hugman (1999: 204) argues that discussions of 'normal' age 'invariably take in questions of need and care in social contexts as well as "differences" in social statuses and roles.'

6. Conclusions

Knowledge is historically and socially situated through traditions of knowledge production and through a community's shared institutional and cultural practices (Smith 1998) and knowledge is legitimated within networks of power in society (Neuman 1997).

Discourse is 'language in use' and print media provide readily accessible and manageable textual data with which to conduct critical discourse analysis. The method of critical discourse analysis can be deployed to uncover the hidden meaning within public narratives and reveal how particular social phenomena like ageing and age identity are legitimated in talk. Newspaper texts associated with a single media event can expose public constructions of particular social groups in contemporary society, including subject positions that construct and sustain particular identities. Public narratives concerning older people position them in particular ways, resulting in both positive and negative consequences for them. Such narratives are conducted in the popular media and by officialdom through official reports. The distinct categorization as 'older' can serve particular functions, from simply describing the population, to targeting resources to meet a particular need in the population. This same categorization can also lead to negative consequences, including the risk of positioning older people as being dependent and in need of care, unproductive and so forth.

Ageing is highly individualised and older people are a homogenous group only with reference to chronological age, but are otherwise heterogeneous in relation to social and economic circumstances, rate of ageing, quality and quantity of social interactions, health and security, and objective and subjective quality of life. Older people are an

integral part of society and are meaningful contributors to the social and economic life of a country (Harbison & Morrow 1998). No matter what the chronological age or personal circumstances of the individual, personhood and autonomy are what is to be valued. However, the construction of old age and later life as different' or 'other to' is common to some extent in most cultures (Hugman 1999). Accordingly, the construction of older people's identity as different in newspaper discourses should not be a surprise. Nevertheless, in representing older people, the media has a responsibility to fully reflect older people's contribution to the growth and enrichment of society (Murphy 2004). The evidence from this study suggests that the newspaper medium is not meeting its responsibility in that regard.

Recommendations

Newspapers are a window on public attitudes and prejudices, culture, politics and social life and they are also an important means of forming public opinion. Hence the language in newspaper discourses is rarely neutral and, may be presented using tacit discursive strategies to construct public discourses in particular ways. Given this constitutive power, newspapers and other media have responsibilities to society in the way that they represent particular social groups.

In their self-declared responsibility to present 'the truth', newspapers should fully reflect older people's contribution to the growth and enrichment of society when writing about them (Murphy 2004). Reportage on older people should be conducted with reference to their role as fully contributing members of society and not as a social group outside of mainstream society.

Words and phrases to name and reference older people should be carefully chosen to avoid imposing an implied homogeneity on older people with reference to their health, capabilities, dispositions, desires, socio-economic status and related social needs.

A judicious editorial oversight of content and tone in reportage should be maintained, with the aim of promoting best practice among journalists in their use of language; derogatory phrases like 'grannies and granddads', 'little old ladies' and 'the pensioners' to collectively reference older people should be avoided.

Editors and sub-editors should consider depth reporting and analysis of real issues affecting older people.

If newspapers are to truly reflect public life, then the overall poor visibility of older people in newspapers and other popular media needs to be addressed.

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