

**National Centre for the Protection of Older People  
Seminar series**

**Constructing ageing and age identify:  
A case study of newspaper discourses**

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**Overview ...**

- Background and literature review
- Method
- Findings
- Discussion
- Questions

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**Introduction and background: Constructing older people**

- 'Apocalyptic demography' and 'added burden' (Martin, Williams & O'Neill 2009)
- The categorical distinction of older people as a distinct social group with particular characteristics and attributes gives rise to particular ways of talking about older people
- These narratives constitute a form of public discourse that constructs ageing and age identities

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**Aims**

- The aim of the study was to describe the ways in which older people are talked about in public print media discourses in Ireland, in order to uncover the ways that newspaper texts socially position older people and construct ageing and particular age identities
- Examine how media representations of ageing and age identity impact on public attitudes on ageing
- Based on the content of media coverage, propose guidelines for media reporting

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**Background**

- A proposal by the Irish Government in late 2008 to revoke provisions of the Health Act 2001 would effectively remove automatic eligibility to a free medical card for people aged seventy years and introduce a means test to determine eligibility
- The proposal gave rise to a brief period of intense media attention on older people; this attention constituted a media event that offered a body of rich data, which could be subjected to critical discourse analysis
- This study critically examined the content of the newspaper coverage of the Government proposal to alter welfare policy in respect of older people for a one-month period of the intense media focus, and in so doing, it aimed to uncover how the associated narratives in the newspaper texts socially positioned older people and constructed ageing and age identity

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**Identity**

- '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'  
Coupland (2009a: 855)
- Once categorized with reference to social identity, certain groups get positioned in particular ways through public discourses

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**Ageing and age identity**

- Identities are socially constructed through public discourse. 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.
- 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 (Coupland 2009: 855)

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**Ageing and age identity**

- 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)
- Older people are presented with reference to competing constructions including frail-healthy, dependent-independent, burden-self-sufficient (Harbison & Morrow 1998)



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**Ageing and age identity in discourse: Consequences**

- Ascribed identities give rise to public attitudes and behaviours towards particular social groups
- Discursive constructions of age identity can be deployed to particular ends, including social and political ends (Pain 2001)
- 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).
- Typically, in language associated with policy on ageing, professionals and older people are positioned in an unequal power relationship
- Social construction of older people is often with reference to health and social services utilization, thereby giving rise to identities of older people as dependent (Ainsworth & Hardy 2009)
- 'Older people's responses to ageist stereotyping may be to internalize these same stereotypes and expectations, such that they experience low self-esteem and concern at being a burden' (Thompson 1998).

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### Age identity in media discourses

- Research into media discourses concerning older people reveals both positive (e.g. 'golden years of a leisure-filled existence' Nussbaum & Coupland 2005) and negative (frailty, cognitive impairment, Miller *et al.* 1999) stereotypes and ageist language (e.g. 'senior moment' Bonnesen and Burgess 2004)
- In popular mass media discourses, older people are largely invisible (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)
- In an analysis of newspaper reporting of older people in Ireland 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

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**Ageing and age identity in media discourses**

● In researching attitudes to older people in the *Economist*, we found that nearly two thirds of the relevant articles portrayed them in a negative light, effectively as a burden to society. The subject matter in three quarters of the articles involved pensions, demography, health care, and politics; and the theme of apocalyptic demography was widespread. Older people were often portrayed as frail non-contributors to society. The alarmist words "time bomb" were commonly used in relation to demography and pensions ... Even with latitude for its tradition of mordant humour, its articles are rife with ageist references, including referring to older people in derogatory terms such as wrinklies and crumblied. (Martin, Williams & O'Neill 2009)

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**Research design: theory and method**

- Critical discourse analysis provided a broad analytical framework for this study and took naturally occurring texts as its data. The study examined how the language in use was deployed to construct particular versions of the world, including ageing and age identity
- A purposive sample of Irish national newspapers published in the one-month period (12 October–13 November 2008) immediately following the announcement of the proposed Irish Government welfare policy change constituted the data set
- For the purpose of the study, our analysis focused on the task of building identities, one of several tasks of language-in-use that both reflect and construct a situation and build reality (Gee 1999)
- We examined how language in use was deployed to construct variable, inconsistent, self-interested and persuasive versions of the social world (Fealy and McNamara 2007).
- Data analysis was informed by the work of Fairclough (analysis of texts and their effects in constructing particular versions of the social world), Wetherell (identity construction and uncovering hidden relations of power and control in discourses; analytic concepts such as 'subject positions') and Gee (language as a way of constructing identities)

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**Research design: analytical process**

- We read and analysed each article independently
- In preliminary analysis of the texts we sought evidence of the use of words and phrases to name and reference older people
- We then conducted more in-depth analysis for evidence of commonly-occurring terms, phrases, expressions and ideas that writers deployed when writing about the topic
- We noted particular and recurring linguistic devices, such as metaphors and rhetoric
- We were also alert to the emergence of particular subject positions that the texts might offer up and in this way we were able to uncover the particular identities that the discourses made available

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## **Findings**

● Analysis identified a total of 227 items, 169 from the broadsheet (*Irish Independent*) and 58 from the tabloid newspaper (*Irish Daily Star*). Items included reportage, commentary items, and combinations of both.

● In the media event, older people had a real, if short-lived, presence in public discourse

● Various nouns and phrases were employed to name and reference older people within the texts. Writers and commentators 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' and the phrase '[the] old and vulnerable' was frequently used

A total of five identities were available either directly or through implication in the texts:

- 'victims',
- 'frail, infirm and vulnerable',
- 'radicalised citizens',
- 'the deserving old'
- 'the undeserving old'

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**Findings ...**

**'Victims'**

- 'vulnerable Irish citizens' (IDS 21/10/08)
- 'easy targets for ... [the] cruel cutbacks' (IDS 23/10/08)
- 'an evil measure to wrestle medical cards from little old ladies' (II 18/10/08)
- 'stealing a bottle from a baby in the pram' (II 20/10/08)
  
- 'cruel attack on the elderly' (IDS 21/10/08)
- 'a most vicious and underhand attack' on older Irish citizens (IDS 17/10/08)
  
- 'Scrooge-like [and] ... cruel' (II 17/10/08)
- 'mean-minded [and] ... soul-less' (IDS 16/10/08)
- 'callous, cold-blooded cruelty' (IDS 17/10/08)

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**Findings ...**

**'Frail, infirm and vulnerable'**

- 'likely to exacerbate existing ailments ... or even bring on new ones' (II 17/10/08)
- 'take into account [the fact that] that over-70s patients require more care because they can have several ailments and need more doctors' time' (II 25/10/08)
- 'soberly-dressed people in rainproof anoraks, minding their rheumatism against the chill' (II 22/10/08).
- '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)
- '[Older people might] 'not last that long without the peace of mind of a [free] medical card' (IDS 21/10/08)
- 'very frightened about the future' (II 16/10/08).
- 'old, vulnerable, [and] in many cases, infirm' (IDS 17/10/08)



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**Findings ...**

**'Radicalised citizens on the march'**

- '[Older people] `would never, ever, have dreamt of ever taking part in a public protest outside their national parliament' (IDS 21/10/08).
- 'silver revolutionaries' (II 22/10/08); 'grey panther movement' (II 23/10/08); 'Grey Brigade [and] ... the new heroes of Ireland' (IDS 23/10/08); 'this noble group of warriors' (II 22/10/08).
- Older people had 'descended on [the] capital' (IDS 21/10/08), 'in their droves by bus, train and Zimmer-frame, a raging winter-coloured sea of grey and white' (II 23/10/08)
- 'the sleeping tiger [awakened]' and (II 23/10/08)
- 'gathering tsunami of anger' (II 18/10/08).

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**Findings ...**

**'The deserving old'**

● '[the] hard-pressed and very deserving pensioners' (IDS 21/10/08)

● 'paid their dues' (II 23/10/08); 'made sacrifices for this nation' (IDS 17/10/09); 'worked hard all their lives ... [making] a valuable contribution ... to our society and country' (II 22/10/08)

● '[Older people deserve] 'better respect and gratitude from the State ... at the end of their hard working lives' (II 22/10/08)

● 'restore the medical card to our most deserving citizens' (IDS 17/10/08)

● '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)

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**Findings ...**

**'The undeserving old'**

- 'bunch of well-to-do pensioners'
- 'We saw that demographic group ... 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 ... 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.' (II 23/10/08)

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**Findings (cont/...)**

- The five identities were interrelated textually, such that some were contingent on others (e.g. older people's identity of 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. This identity of *otherness* was evident in the way that texts assumed homogeneity with reference to older people's capabilities, social needs, dispositions and wishes
- 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
- Representing older people as frail, vulnerable and deserving of welfare support and with reference to health and social services utilization conferred on them an identity of dependence, which also supported the identity of otherness.

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**Discussion**

- 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
- 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
- The 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)
- In publicly protesting (the grey warrior), older people were positioned as deviant in not acting according to this ascribed role, and this was evident in the way that writers represented the protest as anomalous

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**Discussion**

- 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)
- By examining newspaper discourses associated with the media event of interest, this study revealed public constructions of age identity in contemporary Irish society, including particular subject positions that constructed and sustained particular identities for older people
- 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
- The newspaper discourses made available subject positions that produced identities, which, together and collectively, placed older people outside of the mainstream of society
- The ageism inherent in constructions of older people as frail and dependent (Harbison & Morrow 1998) was available in the discourses of collectively naming older people, with writers using terms such as 'pensioners', 'veterans', 'retired' and 'the over-70s'. Naming older people in this way conferred on them a uniform identity of implied dependency.

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**Ageing and age identity in media discourses ...**

● 'Watson is now also notable for defying age; at nearly 60 years and 26 years after his last major victory, he led much of the 2009 Open Championship ...'

● 'Steve Davis defies time ...'

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**Ageing and age identity in media discourses ...**

- High achieving (e.g. 'Silver surfers', 'parachuting granny')



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**Conclusions**

- The negative images of ageing in newspapers are hardly surprising, given that they are found in most cultures and are deeply ingrained in society.
- 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)
- Newspapers offer a window on public opinion, culture, politics and social life (Fairclough 1995). They are influential in setting the agenda for public discourse and they also play a part in forming attitudes (Murphy 2004). Hence, the language in newspaper discourses is rarely neutral and may be presented using tacit discursive strategies to construct public discourses in particular ways (Richardson 1998)
- 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 was not meeting its responsibility in that regard.

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**Recommendations**

- Newspapers should more fully reflect older people's contribution to the growth and enrichment of society when writing about them.
- Words and phrases to name and reference older people need to be carefully chosen to avoid imposing an implied homogeneity on older people with reference to their health, capabilities, socio-economic status and related social needs.
- A judicious editorial oversight of content and tone in reportage, with the aim of promoting best practice among journalists in their use of language is also warranted; the use of derogatory phrases like 'little old ladies' to collectively name older people should be avoided.
- Media literacy training to promote the use of less discriminatory and ageist language would help in this regard, and dialogue between journalists, economists and health professionals would also help.
- If newspapers are to truly reflect public life, then editors and sub-editors should consider depth reporting and analysis of real issues affecting older people.

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'I used to be with it. But then they changed what it was.  
Now what I'm with isn't it, and what's "it" seems scary and  
weird. It'll happen to you.' (Abe Simpson)

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