

Constructing ageing and age identities: a case study of newspaper discourses

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ABSTRACT

Public discourses concerning older people are available in a variety of texts, including popular media, and these discourses position older people with particular age identities. This study examined discursive formations of ageing and age identities in print media in Ireland. Constituting a single media event, newspaper texts concerned with revised welfare provision for older people were subjected to critical discourse analysis and revealed particular ways of naming and referencing older people and distinct 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 and a latent ageism was discernible in texts that deployed collective names like ‘grannies and grandads’ and ‘little old ladies’. Five distinct identity types were available in the texts, variously constructing older people as ‘victims’; ‘frail, infirm and vulnerable’; ‘radicalised citizens’; ‘deserving old’ and ‘undeserving old’. The discourses made available subject positions that collectively produced identities of implied dependency and otherness, thereby placing older people outside mainstream Irish society. The proposition that older people might be healthy, self-reliant and capable of autonomous living was largely absent in the discourses. Newspaper discourses betray taken-for-granted assumptions and reveal dominant social constructions of ageing and age identity that have consequences for older people’s behaviour and for the way that society behaves towards them.

KEY WORDS – ageing, age, identity, discourses, media, newspaper, Ireland.

Introduction

Social policy reports typically begin with summary statistics of population demographics. Often these reports present population projections in a tone of alarm – a phenomenon referred to as ‘apocalyptic demography’ – and reference is frequently made to the impact that population trends will have

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on the future provision of health and social services and the challenge of the 'added burden' that an ageing population will have on a country's finances (Martin, Williams and O'Neill 2009). In contrast, mention of demographic trends for the younger population tends to reflect a tone of optimism that is generally related to their economic and social potential.

Beyond the immediate content of such 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 older people with particular characteristics and attributes. These narratives constitute a form of public discourse and are the subject of this study. 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 ageing and age identities are constructed.

Background and rationale for the study

Since the Health Act of 2001 (Government of Ireland 2001), all people aged 70 years and older in Ireland had automatic entitlement to a non-means-tested medical card, giving them free access to the full range of state health and welfare services. The fiscal consequence of this social policy gave rise to substantial exchequer costs and in October 2008, the Irish Government proposed to revoke the 2001 legislation, effectively withdrawing automatic eligibility to the free services and introducing a means test to determine eligibility. This political action led to an intense focus on older people in the mass media, including television, newspapers and the Internet. This study critically examined the content of newspaper coverage for the period of the intense media focus and it aimed to uncover how the associated narratives in the newspaper texts socially positioned older people and constructed ageing and age identity.

Literature review

Ageing and age identities

Identities are socially constructed through public discourse, including academic discourse, and the various ways of theorising 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 (Powell and Wahidin 2008). Coupland (2009a: 855) writes: '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’.

Discursive constructions of age identity occur in association with other identities, including gender and race, and certain identities get foregrounded, such that one identity gets privileged over another (Ainsworth and Hardy 2007). Social identity is also constructed within discourses of dichotomy, such as young–old, male–female, professional–non-professional, and so forth (Pain 2001).

Discursive constructions of age identities can be deployed to particular ends, including social and political ends; hence legislation on public order can be targeted at ‘menacing’ urban youth (Pain 2001). Competing constructions of older people as frail–healthy, dependent–independent, or as burden–self-sufficient are evident in policy debates (Harbison and 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.

Ageing and age identities in discourses

The social identity that arises from the categorical label ‘old age’ is neither natural nor obvious and discursive constructions of identity in old age are often with reference to health and social services utilisation, thereby giving rise to an identity of dependency (Ainsworth and Hardy 2007). For example, when ageing is discursively constructed as the declining ‘old body’, older people tend to get segregated, congregated, and managed in spaces like nursing and retirement homes and are thereby conferred with an identity of care dependency that, in turn, places them as ‘other to’ the mainstream society (Hugman 1999).

Coupland (2009a: 855) draws attention to the interconnectedness of age identity and other socially constructed identities, such as ‘gender, sexuality, class, culture, religion, nationality and profession.’ Ainsworth and Hardy (2007) demonstrated how textual constructions of the older worker privileged the masculine version of older worker identities, thereby suppressing the female version, and showed how these discursive constructions privilege the older male as culturally sympathetic and meriting state support. Medical narratives concerned with decline and deterioration in old age constitute discourses that function to ‘colonise definitions afforded to the ageing process’ (Powell 2001: 124). New expertise in the care of older people is constructed around the discourse of case management and risk in which new subject positions are created in the form of older people as being at risk of emergency hospital admission (Pickard 2009).

Typically, in language associated with policy on ageing, professionals and older people are positioned in an unequal power relationship (Powell 2001).

Ageing and age identities in media discourses

Media discourses concerning older people contain some positive stereotypes, like old age as the ‘golden years of a leisure-filled existence’ (Nussbaum and Coupland 2004: 238), but negative stereotypes, such as older people as frail (Martin, Williams and O’Neill 2009; Murphy 2004), cognitively impaired (Miller *et al.* 1999), or a burden on society (Martin, Williams and O’Neill 2009) predominate. In popular media discourses older people are largely invisible (Murphy 2004; Robinson and Skill 1995). Older women, in particular, are underrepresented relative to their proportion in the general population (Murphy 2004), and in popular television, a relatively affluent white male version of older identity dominates discourses (Robinson and Skill 1995).

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 and Burgess 2004: 125). For example, Martin, Williams and O’Neill (2009) reported that over two-thirds of articles on older people and ageing in the *Economist*, published over an 11-year period up to 2008, represented a predominantly ageist view of older people as a burden on society, with older people frequently portrayed as frail non-contributors, and a recurrent theme in the discourses included the pension and demographic ‘time bomb’. Bonnesen and Burgess (2004: 125) analysed instances of the phrase ‘senior moment’ in newspapers and concluded that its widespread use indicated an ageist attribute and ageist stereotyping. 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. Older people’s responses to ageist stereotyping may be to internalise these same stereotypes and expectations, such that they experience low self-esteem and concern at being a burden (Thompson 1998).

Research design

Critical discourse analysis provided a broad analytical framework for this study and took naturally occurring texts as data. Using newspaper discourses associated with a single media event concerning older people,

the study examined how language in use was deployed to construct variable, inconsistent, self-interested and persuasive versions of the social world (Fealy and McNamara 2007). Using this approach, the study examined how language in use functioned to establish social identity (Taylor 2001). Discourses provide subject positions through which identities are produced; hence identities are the product of particular forms of ‘discursive work’ that can be tracked in linguistic data (Coupland 2009*a*).

Data collection and sampling

The study analysed the use of language in newspaper texts concerned with an aspect of Irish public policy, namely proposed legislation to reduce welfare provision for older people. Copy from a purposive sample of national newspapers published in the one-month period (12 October to 13 November 2008) immediately following the announcement of the proposed legislation provided the data set. Selected on the basis that they represented a mixed national demographic of readership, *The Irish Independent* (II), a broadsheet newspaper, and *The Irish Daily Star* (IDS), a tabloid newspaper, were examined to retrieve all copy associated with the subject of concern, including reports, commentaries and editorials.

Analysis

Data analysis drew on the work of Fairclough, Wetherell and Gee. Fairclough (2003) focuses 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; analytic concepts such as subject positions (Edley 2001; Edley and 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. Language is thought of as constructing several areas of ‘reality’, including identities, relationships and activities (Gee 1999). The analysis drew on the particular task of building identities.

The analytic process eschews a strict adherence to procedural steps, relying instead on judiciously chosen textual exemplars to illustrate its application (Gee 1999; Richardson 2007). Nevertheless, a brief account of analytical steps is offered. We reviewed the content of all newspaper items that referred either directly or indirectly to the proposal to reduce welfare provision for older people and we independently adjudged all retrieved

items to warrant inclusion in the study. This independent preliminary analysis resulted in the selection of 227 individual items. Two of the researchers then read and analysed each article independently. Items were initially categorised according to a broad typology based on reportage or commentary, and any lack of consensus concerning the categorisation of individual items or the relevance of item content to the study was resolved by mutual consent among the two researchers and by a third reviewer.

In the preliminary analysis of the texts, we sought evidence of the use of words and phrases to name and reference older people. We then conducted a more in-depth analysis for evidence of commonly occurring terms, phrases, expressions and ideas that writers deployed when writing about the topic. From this 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. Through evidence of recurring phrases and other linguistic devices, age identity types were independently abstracted as subject positions from the texts and named collaboratively by the two researchers on the basis of their consistency with our sensitising framework, namely identity as linguistic constructions (Madill 2006).

Findings

Analysis of the sample of national daily newspapers identified a total of 227 items, 169 from the broadsheet newspaper and 58 from the tabloid newspaper. Items included reportage, editorials, commentaries, and combinations of some or all three. Reportage contained details of and commentary on the content of the proposed legislation and a protest march by older people, which was held in Dublin soon after the announcement of the proposed legislation. 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 people affected by the social policy decision. Journalists and commentators liberally deployed rhetorical language and drew on literary references to characterise the political decision and to represent a beleaguered older population.

Positioning older people through language

Within the texts, older people were named and referenced with collective nouns and phrases; 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 October) and the phrase ‘[the] old and vulnerable’ was frequently used. Older people’s identity was also constructed with reference to their offspring; some reporters referenced older people as ‘our elderly parents’ (IDS, 17 October) and ‘[our] ageing parents’ (II, 17 October).

Five distinct identity types were available either directly or by implication in the texts that constructed older people variously as ‘victims’; ‘frail, infirm and vulnerable’; ‘radicalised citizens’; ‘deserving old’ and ‘undeserving old’.

Victims

The decision to remove older people’s automatic entitlement to a medical card 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 October) and ‘easy targets for ... [the] cruel cut-backs’ (IDS, 23 October) and the policy decision was likened to ‘an evil measure to wrestle medical cards from little old ladies’ (II, 18 October) and to ‘stealing a bottle from a baby in the pram’ (II, 20 October).

Politicians were the subject of opprobrium from journalists and commentators for committing a ‘cruel attack on the elderly’ (IDS, 21 October) and were described as ‘vile misers’ (IDS, 17 October) and ‘cowardly predator[s]’ for perpetrating ‘a most vicious and underhand attack’ on older Irish citizens (IDS, 17 October). The policy decision was variously described as ‘Scrooge-like [and] ... cruel’ (II, 17 October), ‘mean-minded [and] ... soul-less’ (IDS, 16 October), and ‘callous, cold-blooded cruelty’ (IDS, 17 October).

The Government action was portrayed as ‘political mugging’ (II, 20 October), which demonstrated ‘contempt for fair play and decency’ (IDS, 15 October). 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?’ and the Irish Finance Minister was entreated to ‘act immediately today and save our elderly any more anguish than you have already inflicted on them’ (IDS, 21 October).

Frail, infirm and vulnerable

In the texts, older people were constructed as frail and infirm or at risk of illness and infirmity. One reporter wrote of the medical profession’s concern that older people would experience stress that was ‘likely to

exacerbate existing ailments ... or even bring on new ones' (II, 17 October). Another wrote of the need to '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 October).

A public rally by older people to protest against the proposed new welfare policy was attended by 'soberly-dressed people in rainproof anoraks, minding their rheumatism against the chill' (II, 22 October). One 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 October). Referring to the financial circumstances that gave rise to the proposed legislation, one writer characterised the parlous state of the Irish banks as being 'even more frail than many of the over-70s' (II, 21 October). Another expressed the fear that older people might 'not last that long without the peace of mind of a [free] medical card' (IDS, 21 October). One reporter associated old age with ineptitude, remarking: 'worry about filling in even more [eligibility] forms ... [will] prevent many qualifying older folk from applying for what has been an automatic entitlement' (II, 16 October).

In the discourses older people were also positioned as vulnerable; one writer observed that 'one of the most vulnerable sectors of society' had now become 'very frightened about the future' (II, 16 October). Being 'old, vulnerable, [and] in many cases, infirm' (IDS, 17 October), older people were represented as the least able to resist the change in welfare policy, which would 'make life more difficult for [them]' (II, 20 October). 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 October).

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 protest 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 October). Some reporters appeared to derive delight in reporting what appeared to them to be a strange and unusual public spectacle.

Mythical, romantic and military metaphors were deployed to characterise the event and its main protagonists, including metaphors of old brave warriors and old revolutionaries; the protestors were variously referred to as ‘silver revolutionaries’ (II, 22 October), the ‘grey panther movement’ (II, 23 October), the ‘Grey Brigade [and] ... the new heroes of Ireland’ (IDS, 23 October), and ‘this noble group of warriors’ (II, 22 October). Older people had ‘descended on [the] capital’ (IDS, 21 October), arriving ‘in their droves by bus, train and Zimmer-frame, a raging winter-coloured sea of grey and white’ (II, 23 October). For the thousands of pensioners who ‘besieged’ the parliament buildings in Dublin (IDS, 25 October) their weapons of assault were ‘Zimmer frames’ (IDS, 30 October) and ‘Werther’s Originals’ (IDS, 25 October). The protest represented ‘senior citizens’ pester power in action’ (II, 23 October) and these radicalised and angry citizens were about to unleash a great assault on those that had roused them from their slumber and stirred their anger. One reporter referred to ‘the sleeping tiger’ that had been awakened (II, 23 October) and another wrote of the ‘gathering tsunami of anger’ causing panic among politicians (II, 18 October).

The deserving old

The tone of much commentary was sympathy for older people who were positioned as ‘[the] hard-pressed and very deserving pensioners’ (IDS, 21 October) who had earned their automatic entitlement to state welfare, having contributed to society as taxpayers throughout their productive working lives. Older people had ‘paid their dues’ (II, 23 October), had ‘made sacrifices for this nation’ (IDS, 17 October) and had ‘worked hard all their lives ... [making] a valuable contribution ... to our society and country’ (II, 22 October) and they deserved ‘better respect and gratitude from the State ... at the end of their hard working lives’ (II, 22 October).

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 October). Politicians were entreated to ‘restore the medical card to our most deserving citizens’ (IDS, 17 October) 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’ (IDS, 17 October).

The undeserving old

Despite the prevalence of expressions 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 free state benefit. One writer berated the angry ‘bunch of well-to-do pensioners’ for protesting at the threatened loss of their welfare entitlement and for deciding economic policy for the entire nation: ‘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”’ (II, 23 October). The same writer warned 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 greily querulous retain all their assets unto the grave’. Another remarked that the older people who protested at the threatened loss of state benefit were either among the small percentage that would lose their automatic entitlement to welfare or were among the majority that would not lose their entitlement. In any event, the writer observed, the protestors confirmed ‘the calibre of person we’re dealing with’ (II, 1 November). 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 October).

Discussion

This study examined discursive formations of ageing and age identity in Irish print media. The media event under review 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.

Newspapers as discourse

Media coverage of events constitutes ongoing conversations that both inform and are informed by taken-for-granted and often competing repertoires for making sense of the world (Frewin, Pond and Tuffin 2009; Gee 2005; Wetherell 1998). Newspapers offer a window on public opinion, culture, politics and social life (Fairclough 1995), are influential in agenda setting in public discourse and help to form attitudes (Murphy 2004). Being contextually situated and directed at *doing* something, newspaper language is rarely neutral and, consequently, may deploy tacit discursive strategies to construct public discourses in particular ways (Richardson 2007). Events and identities are constructed through journalists’ and other stakeholders’ values, social languages and interpretive repertoires.

The idiom in which a public discourse is conducted gives rise to particular types of narratives that, in turn, function to position particular social groups with particular identities. By examining newspaper discourses associated with a single media event, this study revealed public constructions of ageing and age identity in contemporary Irish society, including subject positions that construct and sustain particular identities for older people. In the media event examined, older people were the focus of attention and had an unusually intense, if short-lived, presence in public discourse. The media event permitted access to the ways in which various discourses were used to construct specific repertoires for positioning the self and others.

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 (Connolly-Ahern and Broadway 2009). Our analysis revealed that despite the intense focus of attention on older people's economic position, and similar to Murphy's (2004) earlier analysis of Irish newspaper discourses, there was little in-depth analysis of critical issues around ageing.

Identities

Language 'simultaneously reflects and constructs the situation or context in which it is used' (Gee 1999: 97), and just as individuals and groups use language to fashion their own identities, so they can also fashion others' identities. Coupland writes that 'people are simultaneously the *products* and the *producers* of discourse' (2009a: 856, original emphasis). From our analysis we found that older people's identities were constructed within one of five distinct identity types and these identities were interrelated textually, such that some were contingent on others. For example, older people's victimhood was contingent on their frailty and vulnerability. Similarly, their identity as 'the deserving old' was contingent on their representation as vulnerable, fearful and weak (Pain 2001).

Ageing subjectivities associated with 'otherness' are produced in such practices as spatially segregating older people in institutional forms of residential care (Hugman 1999) and stereotyping them as homogeneous and passive (Gamliel and Hazan 2009). The idea that these 'others' should now emerge from their residential care homes and mortgage-free houses to demand state welfare not only gave rise to their identity as improbable radicals, but also constructed a subject position as undeserving 'rich and greily querulous' asset grabbers. Thus, while most texts appeared to

valorise the new radicals, their subjectivity as radicalised citizen was used by some commentators to admonish the ‘well-to-do pensioners’ for retaining their wealth at the expense of the younger population. Accordingly, the identity as radicalised citizen was related textually to the identity of ‘undeserving old’ and in this new associated subjectivity of privilege and arrogance, the state was justified in removing welfare entitlement and older people themselves were tacitly called on to forego their entitlement.

Identity as other

For older people, selfhood is shaped by the ways that others view and act towards them (Thompson 1998). 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. Naming and referencing language can significantly impact on the way that older people are viewed, both in terms of identifying their associated group and establishing the relationship between the namer and the named (Richardson 2007). Naming and referencing terms like ‘the pensioners’ and ‘the over-70s’ carry differences in their denoted and connoted meanings and perform particular functions within texts, positioning older people as not only a distinct demographic category (denoted) but as a group outside of or different to the average citizen (connoted) (Richardson 2007).

Older people’s identity of otherness (Biggs 2005; Hugman 1999) was also available in the way that diversity was ignored; older people were positioned with an assumed homogeneity with reference to health and infirmity, capabilities, social needs, dispositions and wishes, welfare dependency and improbable radicalism. This ‘us/them’ discourse of opposition (Hugman 1999) implied a particular configuration of ascribed attributes, behaviours and dispositions, including withdrawal from productive work, bodily decline and dependency on welfare and/or care-giving. It also constructed a discontinuity between past and present identities, creating a temporal rupture in which older people’s past identities were marginalised or ignored. In addition, the use of the phrase ‘our elderly parents’ constructed older people’s identity with reference to their offspring and reference to the ‘working population’ positioned older people as the unproductive population.

Frail and infirm

Textual constructions of older people in the newspaper texts were dominated by the idea that older people are frail and likely to become infirm

and dependent. Murphy (2004) similarly reported a suggestion of weakness, vulnerability and feebleness in the way that older people were written about in Irish newspapers. This identity 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 2009*b*: 954). For example, older people were not really up to the challenge of extensive form-filling or marching in the cold and this normative construction of older age was at variance with reality (Hugman 1999).

Texts that spoke of older people as having ‘paid their dues’ positioned them as ‘the deserving old’ and, by inference, as a distinct group meriting state benefit. Constructed in this culturally sympathetic way (Ainsworth and Hardy 2007), older Irish people were to be ‘pampered and left to enjoy their twilight years in comfort and security’. However, some texts positioned older people as well-to-do and privileged, revealing a less than sympathetic construction that might feature more prominently in the post-Celtic Tiger Ireland.

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 being forced to become radicalized in the face of the threat to their income and health. When they took to the streets, acting as most other social groups tend to act in situations of adversity, their behaviour was represented textually as radical action from a new radical group, but sub-textually as ultimately ineffective; while they might be radical citizens, these ‘silver revolutionaries’, marching with Zimmer frames and ‘minding their rheumatism against the chill’ were never really about to tear down the gates.

Deviant behaviour

Older people achieving seemingly great feats of courage or skill are often celebrated in public media (Hugman 1999); witness the typical embodiments of the high-achieving older person in the silver (Web) surfer or the parachuting pensioner (Murphy 2004). The discourses examined here suggest a new variant of what Harwood (2008) refers to as counter-stereotypical activities, namely ‘the grey warrior’. In the way that some journalists represented the older people’s protest rally as anomalous, older people were deviant in not acting according to their ascribed role. Here a paradox is created. In stepping outside the strict social and biological reference points of ageing to engage in a public protest, older people were

placing themselves as part of the public mainstream, thereby rendering their case for free entitlement to state services as less tenable (Biggs 2005). This inherent tension between identities of conformity and distinctiveness places older people in a difficult position; emphasising their identity as part of the public mainstream threatens the entitlements and freedoms that come with pensioner status (Biggs 2005).

Ageism

Derogative opinions of older people can influence the use of age-based attributions of older people's behaviours (Bonnesen and Burgess 2004). 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). The discursive construction of ageing and age identity revealed a latent ageism in the texts in the way that older people were conferred with a uniform identity of implied dependency (Harbison and Morrow 1998); they were 'the pensioners', 'the veterans' and 'the retired'. The use of naming phrases like 'grannies and granddads', the more cosy and sympathetic identity of 'older folk' and 'little old ladies', and the identity of victimhood also constituted an inherent ageist discourse.

Multiple discourses

The newspaper texts operated to discursively produce multiple ageing subjectivities. Dominant among the discursive constructions of age identities was a discourse of otherness, a discourse constructed from subjectivities of dependence and vulnerability and from particular naming and referencing devices that conferred on them homogeneity. Constructed in a single media event, these same ageing subjectivities are evident in other public discourses, including those found in social policy debates and reports (Harbison and Morrow 1998). Ainsworth and Hardy (2007: 276) illustrate how 'the relational nature of identity construction can easily become competitive in policy contexts ... [such that] "most disadvantaged" status confers access to greater public recognition and government benefits'. The same discursive manoeuvres that reproduced existing constructions of older people as needy and deserving of state support (Ainsworth and Hardy 2007) also constructed a version of them as privileged and unworthy. Thus, alongside constructions such as dependent-independent (Harbison and Morrow 1998), a new competing construction of age identity emerges, that of the deserving-undeserving old. Positioned in this way, older people are subject to particular policy devices, like the regulation of labour supply through enforced retirement

(Harbison and Morrow 1998) and are placed in a discursive bind, in which they are, at one and the same time, both dependent and affluent. Biggs (2005) points to tensions in ageing debates between trends that position older people as having, on the one hand, ‘discernible differences’ and on the other, as being on a lifecourse in which there is little that is intrinsic to later life. He 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.

Conclusions

This study was based on the assumptions that identities are actively constructed in conversations between people and in other discursive contexts, including public media texts. Newspaper texts, *qua* naturally occurring language, expose subject positions that construct and sustain particular social identities. The newspaper texts examined in this study made available subject positions, which collectively produced ageing and age identities of implied dependency and otherness. The proposition that older people might be healthy, self-reliant and capable of autonomy in the way they live their lives was largely absent in the texts.

The construction of an age identity of otherness in newspaper discourses should not be surprising, given that this construction is common in most cultures (Hugman 1999). Despite individual’s active meaning-making and language use concerning their own chronological age (Nikander 2009), in developed western cultures, chronological age is reified as a facet of personhood such that older people are positioned with a collective identity that establishes a discourse of us/them (Hugman 1999). The texts examined here confirm this us/them discourse in newspaper texts, with extensive evidence of ageing subjectivities associated with diminished faculties and attendant dependence. Our findings reflect the inherent ageism that resides in the wider public discourse concerning older people, such as the negative and alarmist tone of population ageing discourses, so evident in western media (Martin, Williams and O’Neill 2009). The ageist discourse available in our texts add further evidence for the pan-cultural character of ageism, which is widespread in both developed western countries (Bodner and Lazar 2008) and in eastern collectivist societies (Cuddy, Norton and Fiske 2005).

Given their constitutive power to construct public discourses in particular ways through tacit discursive strategies, newspapers have responsibilities to society in the way that they represent particular social

groups. In their self-declared responsibility to present ‘the truth’, newspapers could more fully reflect older people’s contribution to the growth and enrichment of society when writing about them (Murphy 2004). 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, dispositions, desires, 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 warranted; derogatory phrases like ‘grannies and granddads’ and ‘little old ladies’ to collectively reference older people should be avoided. Media literacy training to promote the use of less discriminatory and ageist language would help in this regard. Negative stereotypes and prejudices about ageing are deeply ingrained and associated ‘apocalyptic demography’ narratives could be addressed through dialogue between journalists, economists and health professionals (Martin, Williams and O’Neill 2009). 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. The evidence from this study suggests that Irish newspapers are not meeting their responsibility in this regard.

The phrase ‘older people’ is a linguistic generalisation that serves a range of functions; it is at once a descriptive category, a basis for ‘expert’ interpretation and cataloguing of needs and resources, and a linguistic device to subject position. Whatever its function, ultimately it constructs older people as unproductive/dependent and other/marginal, and in this way, it gives rise to subjectivities that both stigmatise (Hazan 1994) and sustain institutionalised ageism (Bytheway 2005). By using discourse theory as a research framework and ‘situated discourse’ as data (Coupland 2009*a*), researchers can usefully examine multiple discourses and recover evidence in situated discourses of new and competing constructions of ageing and age identities.

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