

Miracle babies, unfit mothers and the fertility
bogeyman:
discourses of infertility.

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Why infertility?

“the social construction of health and illness is perhaps even more striking in the case of infertility than it is for other conditions”.

(Greil et al., 2010)

Problematic intersection of social and medical
Site of ongoing legislative and social change
Warnock Report, 1984 - “right to a child”



Putting infertility in context

Key events in time period

Natalie Evans lost legal case to use frozen embryos (2006)

Patricia Rashbrook was the oldest UK woman to successfully undergo fertility treatment (2007)

Clinics began to freeze eggs as well as embryos (2009)

NICE guidelines on treating same sex couples (2011)

Previous discourses:

- desperation (Letherby, 2002)
- the fertility lottery (DeLacey, 2002)
- clock ticking (Thompson, 2007)

Research Questions

1. What discourses of infertility are found in blogs, clinical websites and news reports on infertility?
2. What discourses of the uncertainty surrounding infertility are there in these texts?

Infertility data

Corpus	Source	Time period	# tokens
Public	UK national newspapers	2006- 2012	5,259,717
Personal	UK blogs	2006-2012	1,604,725
Practitioner	UK clinical websites	2012	768,178

UKWAC 10m sample as reference corpus

Method – a multistep process

Raw data

Corpus tools (WordsmithTools)

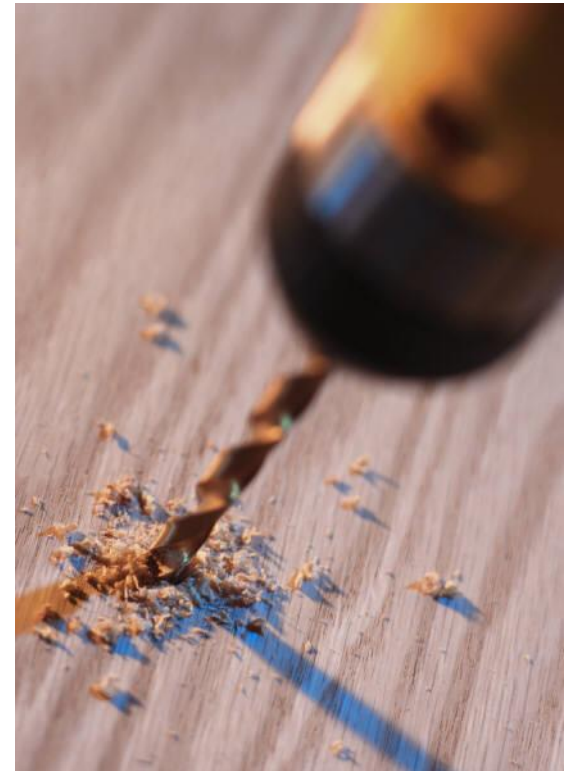
Wordlist (frequency)

Keywords (significance)

Themes

Concordance lines

Discourses



Keywords as a way in

news_lst.kws

N	Key word	Freq.	%RC.	Freq	RC.	%Keyness	P
1	SHE	28,315	0.53	8,279	0.08	0.80	0.000000
2	WOMEN	18,547	0.35	2,608	0.02	0.77	0.000000
3	FERTILITY	12,631	0.24	69	0.00	0.74	0.000000
4	HER	26,289	0.49	8,798	0.08	0.83	0.000000
5	IVF	9,556	0.18	20	0.00	0.84	0.000000
6	ITS	7,736	0.14	29	0.00	0.54	0.000000
7	SPERM	7,530	0.14	19	0.00	0.59	0.000000
8	SAID	17,827	0.33	7,951	0.07	0.74	0.000000
9	TREATMENT	10,004	0.19	1,920	0.02	0.37	0.000000
10	BABY	8,344	0.16	960	0.01	0.44	0.000000
11	EGGS	6,235	0.12	173	0.00	0.90	0.000000
12	I	51,981	0.97	53,746	0.49	0.32	0.000000
13	DONT	4,986	0.09	39	0.00	0.72	0.000000
14	EMBRYOS	4,942	0.09	33	0.00	0.68	0.000000
15	PREGNANT	5,214	0.10	177	0.00	0.44	0.000000
16	SAYS	9,083	0.17	2,623	0.02	0.93	0.000000
17	BUT	32,465	0.61	30,022	0.27	0.79	0.000000

combined blogs_files_lst.kws

N	Key word	Freq.	%RC.	Freq	RC.	%Keyness	P
1		58,903	3.63	53,746	0.49	102,245	0.000000
2	MY	21,593	1.33	13,388	0.12	5,046.07	0.000000
3	ME	11,901	0.73	8,464	0.08	3,630.34	0.000000
4	IM	5,670	0.35	14	0.00	3,120.53	0.000000
5	ITS	4,275	0.26	29	0.00	7,234.06	0.000000
6	DONT	3,554	0.22	39	0.00	4,188.91	0.000000
7	SO	11,364	0.70	17,439	0.16	2,877.51	0.000000
8	AM	5,946	0.37	4,526	0.04	1,362.12	0.000000
9	IVE	2,670	0.16	3	0.00	0,927.76	0.000000
10	PREGNANT	2,414	0.15	177	0.00	3,678.06	0.000000
11	DIDNT	1,962	0.12	6	0.00	7,983.21	0.000000
12	SHE	6,136	0.38	8,279	0.08	7,830.89	0.000000
13	IVF	1,796	0.11	20	0.00	7,166.07	0.000000
14	IT	20,816	1.28	72,129	0.65	5,499.14	0.000000
15	CANT	1,605	0.10	14	0.00	5,438.57	0.000000
16	BUT	11,157	0.69	30,022	0.27	5,987.71	0.000000
17	ID	1,450	0.09	4	0.00	5,904.48	0.000000
18	HAD	7,884	0.49	17,533	0.16	5,738.43	0.000000
19	JUST	5,619	0.35	9,665	0.09	5,642.96	0.000000
20	KNOW	4,238	0.26	5,528	0.05	5,567.38	0.000000

Themes - uncertainty

Theme	NEWS	CLINIC	BLOG
Body and Illness	cancer, hospital, NHS, medical	procedure , scan, appointment, test	pain, injections, pee, blood, pill, sex,
Uncertainty	per cent, risk, chances, chance	success rates, risks, chance	hope
Self and others	children, doctors, men, mothers	clinic, woman, patient, partner	clinic, baby, nurse, woman, H, OH, DH

Table 1. Themes and related keywords across the infertility corpus

lemma	NEWS	CLINIC	BLOG
Risk	0.0010	0.0010	0.0001
Chance	0.0008	0.0014	0.0005
Hope	0.0003	0.0004	0.0009

Table 2. Frequency of lemma as % of corpus

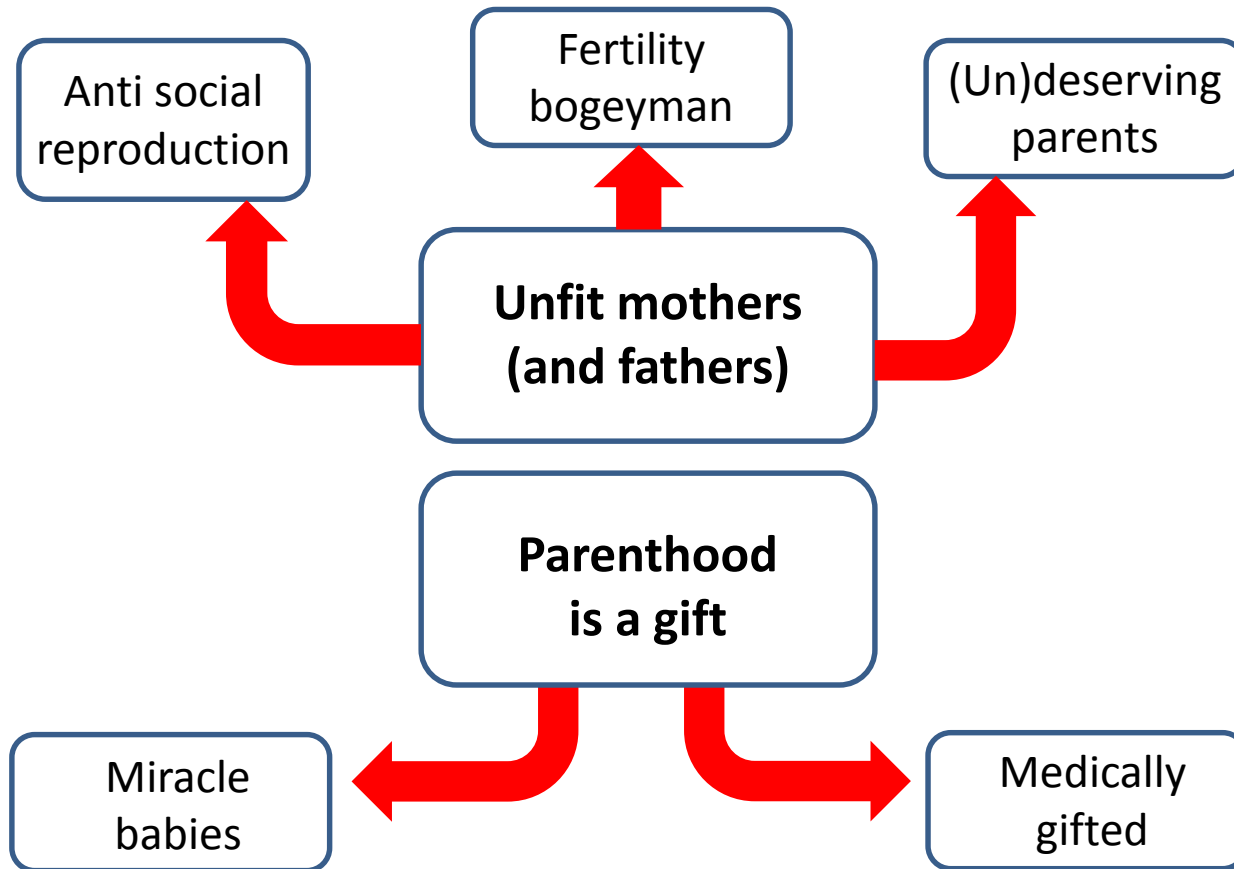
Keywords to concordance lines to discourses

7	Body Mass Index was an independent risk factor for infertility'. LOAD-DATE:	10,545	51430%	072%	072%	mail200609.TXT	87%
8	Pg. 17 LENGTH: 106 words SIX men at risk of infertility following cancer	2,090	12233%	039%	039%	sun200902.TXT	94%
9	that men who use wi-fi on their laptops risk infertility. Didn't they used to tell us	3,019	14193%	034%	034%	mirror201112.TXT	96%
10	loss, bad skin, infertility, and increased risk of diabetes and heart disease, but	5,417	26740%	032%	032%	tele200806.TXT	96%
11	birth. Alcohol can also increase the risk of infertility or miscarriage and has	610	2732%	02%	02%	mirror200810.TXT	51%
12	be genetically similar, "leading to a high risk for offspring and even infertility",	3,620	17943%	030%	030%	press200910.TXT	94%
13	over 32in is deemed to be more of a risk factor for infertility, as well as heart	2,142	11456%	039%	039%	mirror200711.TXT	99%
14	that men who use wi-fi on their laptops risk infertility. Didn't they used to tell us	3,188	15293%	039%	039%	mirror201112.TXT	99%
15	that leads to infertility and an increased risk of ectopic pregnancy. In men,	5,587	22891%	047%	047%	imes200710.TXT	74%
16	changes hormones, which affect your risk to conditions such as infertility,	589	3533%	014%	014%	mirror201107.TXT	57%
17	produce abnormal eggs, increasing the risk of infertility, miscarriage and birth	4,291	16957%	047%	047%	press201009.TXT	74%
18	Saturday Infertility 'increases cancer risk' SECTION: NEWS; In Brief; Pg. 18	4,197	19096%	042%	042%	tele200805.TXT	71%
19	stop there: cannabis increases the risk of cancer or infertility. Despite all	3,424	21475%	020%	020%	mail200610.TXT	59%
20	and pesticides are also at a higher risk of male factor infertility. I would	3,019	15679%	074%	074%	sun200607.TXT	87%
21	CLEANING teeth twice a day slashes risk of male INFERTILITY, dentists claim	1,222	7071%	051%	051%	sun200903.TXT	82%
22	longer has periods and there is a high risk of infertility. Those with an eating	684	3193%	072%	072%	mirror201111.TXT	85%
23	and infection, as well reducing the risk of infertility." Chlamydia is the most	321	1393%	018%	018%	press200806.TXT	60%
24	their general infertility and subsequent high-risk pregnancies cost the NHS a	278	1034%	011%	011%	sun200710.TXT	56%
25	, who should be made fully aware of the risk of infertility. The study is likely to	7,007	32593%	079%	079%	mail200801.TXT	89%

Recurring themes of risk, chance and hope

Theme	Example
Age	Leading doctors have issued a stark warning that women should become mothers by the age of 35 or face a greater risk of infertility, miscarriage and health problems during pregnancy. (Guardian 2009)
Obesity	What lifestyle changes can I make to boost my chance of success (eg, diet, exercise, stopping smoking, etc)? (NHS)
Responsibility	Because of my obsession with food and crash dieting when I had bulimia, I've ruined my chance of having a baby naturally (Mail 2007)
Medical intervention	And then I've wondered if it's daft, when we're in this situation, to spend another £10,000+ on a fourth IVF treatment when we have such a low chance of success. (IF020)

Discourses/sub discourses



The Fertility Bogeyman - Time

Britain is facing an infertility **timebomb**, as couples *delay parenthood* and damage their chances of having children in later life. (Guardian 2009)

Women who choose motherhood at a later age also run much greater health risks for themselves and their baby (Mail 2010)

The older you are the greater your risk of having a miscarriage (Clinic CR)

Whether through choice or circumstances, many British women are leaving it later to have their first child but knowing their 'fertility age' means they are aware of whether the odds of conception are in their favour or if **time is running out** (Clinic MF)

I can't risk having something to blame myself about if things don't work out. (IF012)

At 38 I feel I have a responsibility to give my body the best chance to get pregnant (IF022)

Anti-social reproduction

An alarming rise in the number of women giving birth prematurely risks *overloading the NHS* and may be linked to increases in **obese** and **older mothers** (Times 2006)

They should be made to clean up their act and get off **drugs** completely before they qualify for fertility treatment, because *it is so expensive* (Mail 2007)

If I wanted a baby badly enough to go through IVF, I would give up **alcohol** totally. (Mirror 2010)

Fat women and **smokers** should simply not be allowed free IVF (Mirror 2009)

Problems with conceiving is a growing problem in **Britain**, primarily because of *postponed childbearing*, but also due to **unhealthy lifestyles** (Mail 2011)

Modern life is **not very good** for fertility; diet, lack of exercise, smoking, alcohol and even some jobs can **reduce fertility** making it more difficult to conceive. (Clinic MF)

Because on hearing that she was pregnant at over 19 stone, and that she had been even heavier when she bore her first child - I'm so sorry, but rage, pure, acid rage nearly blew the top of my head. (IF018)

(Un) deserving parents

I am not a drinker or a smoker and I have always kept myself fit but I made other **significant lifestyle changes**. In retrospect I believe it is these which finally led to me becoming pregnant (Mail 2011)

Think carefully about what **you want** from life and make some **time** for dating to give yourself the chance of getting the husband and family **you desire**. (Mirror 2009)

An important step in becoming pregnant is ensuring that you are healthy, which **you can do** by making simple lifestyle changes. (Clinic NH)

Every day **unhealthy, unfit, heavy drinking, smoking** women get pregnant but I don't. I really don't believe that there is much more **I can do** that will increase my chances by any more than an infinitesimal amount. (IF014)

Fiancé and I have **done all we can-** bd every night for a week, used OPKs so I know we could have caught the right time, no **alcohol** or **caffeine** for me (after I read that just 1 drink a week can reduce your chances of conceiving by 7%) (IF001)

Infertility is not a lifestyle choice!

This is the group who really get a raw deal from the **media** especially from papers like the UK Daily Mail. This group is usually made up of women who either never met the right father for their children, wanted a career, or had some form of **weight/age** issue and now they find themselves childless not by choice. The media constantly berate these women for damaging their own fertility by their **lifestyle choices** (IF002)

This woman has a lot to learn, and so do the people who depend on **the media** and second-hand stories to educate them about reproductive technologies. I suppose it's up to us to try to make the people around us understand that **infertility is not a lifestyle choice**, and that some of us can't just "relax and it'll happen". (IF020)

What these people fail to realise is that wanting to have a child - your own biological child - is an inherent, deep rooted, totally natural urge, **not a lifestyle choice**, especially for those who can't conceive naturally (IF003)

Giving a chance

we create tailored treatment plans that address the specific needs of both partners to give you the highest combined chance of a successful pregnancy. (Clinic BE)

We have an inclusive policy at XXXX Fertility and accept couples with a lower chance of success, provided there is no medical risk [for IVF treatment we accept women up to age 45]. (Clinic WO)

No patient able to receive treatment is ever excluded on the basis solely of low chances of success (Clinic BR)

The sensible part of me knows that it would be silly to undergo treatment when there isn't much chance of it working, but as anyone who has been TTC a long time will tell you - I'd do anything even if there was only a half a percent chance of it working (IF009)

if we don't at least try to have treatment at XXXX clinic, I will regret it, because I'll always wonder if their tailored approach could be what was lacking on the first two attempts (IF020)

Giving and taking away

CANCER patients face being told they have lost the chance to father children after a scandal-hit **NHS** fertility unit accidentally destroyed their frozen sperm (Mail 2011)

The **NHS** in England and Wales has been criticised for denying many desperate couples the chance of a baby (Independent 2006)

though they want the best chance of success, they are not doctors and have to rely on the advice of the clinician (Times 2006)

But can science offer a safety net to women who hope to preserve their fertility - and should it? (Telegraph 2011)

If they were not strong enough then that would be down to God or fate or whatever, but they are not even being given that chance (Mail 2006)

I'm not stupid. I know there'd be no guarantee I'd fall pregnant if I had a **free go at IVF** but I'd just like the chance. In fact I believe it's my right. (Mirror 2009)

Miracle babies – gift of hope

We've been giving hope to people and creating families for over 25 years (Clinic MA)

I was reading the article expecting to find the **magic** formula for success. (IF014)

I can only hope that all of this has made a difference and we can hope for a **miracle** naturally (IF007)

Tanya from Eastenders is on the front of Ok with her **miracle** twins from IVF - I love a success story - and she got pregnant first time so there is hope. (IF025)

I think one of the reasons I've found infertility hard to deal with is I've always considered myself such a **lucky** person. (IF015)

Infertility is a medical condition, not a punishment from God or Mother Nature. (IF025)

Miracle babies – don't give up hope

We hope that our study will give them hope and encourage them to keep trying for the baby they want so much (Clinic OR)

perhaps our chances were slim and didn't dare hold out too much hope but my nurse was absolutely brilliant and so encouraging. (Clinic BH)

But, desperate for a child of her own, she never gave up hope. And incredibly, after seven years of trying, her dream has come true - thanks to the humble aspirin. (mirror 2010)

It's also a good story of hope for anyone embarking on IVF. (IF007)

Implicit within this story was the assumption that, if you want it badly enough, and if you just keep going, you'll get pregnant in the end. It's an assumption which, it seems to me, also haunts the infertility community (IF024)

Conclusions?

Metadiscourse

The chance of children is a gift to those who deserve it but who has the right to deny that chance?

By looking at a range of keywords across it possible to see the same discourses manifested in different ways

Methodological issues

How much data is too much data?

Beware mission creep

Harder to find contesting discourses within corpus as tendency to focus on most frequent i.e. dominant

Interesting to work on a small subset carrying out traditional CDA to see similarity/differences

Refs and acknowledgements

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