

DIGITALES ARCHIV

ZBW – Leibniz-Informationszentrum Wirtschaft
ZBW – Leibniz Information Centre for Economics

Baldwin, Kylie

Book Part

Chapter 3 Timing Motherhood

Provided in Cooperation with:

ZBW LIC

Reference: In: Egg Freezing, Fertility and Reproductive Choice (2019). Emerald Publishing Limited, S. 37 - 53.

<https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-78756-483-120191002>.

doi:10.1108/978-1-78756-483-120191002.

This Version is available at:

<http://hdl.handle.net/11159/664349>

Kontakt/Contact

ZBW – Leibniz-Informationszentrum Wirtschaft/Leibniz Information Centre for Economics

Düsternbrooker Weg 120

24105 Kiel (Germany)

E-Mail: [rights\[at\]zbw.eu](mailto:rights[at]zbw.eu)

<https://www.zbw.eu/>

Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieses Dokument darf zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden. Sie dürfen dieses Dokument nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, aufführen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen. Sofern für das Dokument eine Open-Content-Lizenz verwendet wurde, so gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte. Alle auf diesem Vorblatt angegebenen Informationen einschließlich der Rechteinformationen (z.B. Nennung einer Creative Commons Lizenz) wurden automatisch generiert und müssen durch Nutzer:innen vor einer Nachnutzung sorgfältig überprüft werden. Die Lizenzangaben stammen aus Publikationsmetadaten und können Fehler oder Ungenauigkeiten enthalten.

Terms of use:

This document may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes. You are not to copy it for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the document in public, to perform, distribute or otherwise use the document in public. If the document is made available under a Creative Commons Licence you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the licence. All information provided on this publication cover sheet, including copyright details (e.g. indication of a Creative Commons license), was automatically generated and must be carefully reviewed by users prior to reuse. The license information is derived from publication metadata and may contain errors or inaccuracies.



<https://savearchive.zbw.eu/terms-of-use>

ZBW

Leibniz-Informationszentrum Wirtschaft
Leibniz Information Centre for Economics

Mitglied der

Leibniz
Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

Chapter 3

Timing Motherhood

As was explored in some detail in Chapter 1 of this book, recent decades have seen significant changes in the fertility patterns and behaviour of men and women in the United Kingdom as well as much of the Western world (Kreyenfeld, 2010; Ní Bhrolcháin & Toulemon, 2005). This shift towards delayed childbearing has been attributed to a variety of factors such as women's greater participation in higher education and in the labour force (Daly, 2011; Penfold & Foxton, 2015); a change in gender roles brought about by the increased reliability of methods of contraception (Tough et al., 2002); the normalisation of multiple partnerships prior to marriage and the more frequent breakdown of marriages and relationships (Beaujouan & Ní Bhrolcháin, 2011; Mills et al., 2011); as well as economic uncertainty and market instability (Adsera, 2011; Chabé-Ferret & Gobbi, 2018; Del Bono, Weber, & Winter-Ebmer, 2011). Such social changes and conditions not only have seen greater numbers of women pursue motherhood later in life but have also seen an increasing number of women and couples reach the end of their childbearing years without having children¹ (ONS, 2018). A key focus of UK health policy in recent decades has been on reducing the number of conceptions and births to teenagers, which now rests at the lowest levels since records began (Arai, 2009; McDermott & Graham, 2005). However, what has since emerged as a new 'social problem' are the growing numbers of women both in the United Kingdom and across many parts of the Western world who are beginning their childbearing at later ages and who, in some cases, are unable to complete their desired family size as a result (Habbema et al., 2015).

Drawing critically on concepts and tools from lifecourse theory and wider social scientific research, as well as on the findings of interviews with users of social egg freezing, this chapter explores the complex issue of reproductive timing. Specifically, this chapter examines how the 'right time' for motherhood is commonly constructed and discussed in academic as well as lay and media discourse and explores women's attitudes towards and experiences of reproductive timing and the difficulties they encountered in planning for motherhood. This chapter also critically explores key concepts of delayed and older motherhood and problematises the way in which women are often presented as 'choosing' to delay pregnancy.

¹Eighteen per cent of women born in 1971 have remained 'childfree' compared to 11% of women born in 1944.

3.1. The Right Time for Motherhood

Reproductive timing and women's entry into motherhood have been the subject of much research and discussion by demographers and social scientists alike (Earle & Letherby, 2007; Meyers, 2001; Perrier, 2013; Sevón, 2005; Smajdor, 2009; Woollett & Boyle, 2000), many of whom have drawn on lifecourse theory and concepts such as age norms, the timing of lives and lifecourse transitions as part of this discussion (Daly, 2011; Henwood, Shirani, & nee Procter, 2011; McQuillan, Greil, Shreffler, & Bedrous, 2015). The concept of a normative lifecourse and the anticipation of particular lifecourse milestones, transitions and events are thus central to any discussion of reproductive delay and women's use of egg freezing technology.

Whilst it has been argued by some that the modern lifecourse has become increasingly differentiated and non-standardised (Macmillan, 2005; Neale & Flowerdew, 2003) with greater emphasis on individual choice (Beck-Gernsheim & Beck, 1995), research indicates that individuals continue to frame their lives, and associated lifecourse transitions, not solely as the outcome of individual agency but as the result of assumed lifecourse expectations which reflect traditional and expected norms of behaviour (Webb & Daniluk, 1999). The transition to parenthood is one such life event which is still anticipated by most men and women (Daly, 2011; Henwood et al., 2011; Lampic et al., 2006; Loftus & Andriot, 2012) and is an example of one of a significant number of commonalities which can be observed across the lifecourse of different individuals (Exley & Letherby, 2001). Other transitional events may include leaving home, entering into a long-term committed co-resident relationship or getting married. Like becoming a parent, these transitions are often expected to take place in a particular sequence or at certain times or ages within the lifecourse (Hagestad & Neugarten, 1985; Neugarten, 1973; Settersten Jr, 2003). These 'age norms' are often contingent on and shaped by shared social values and mediated by factors such as socio-economic status, level of education, and religious or cultural beliefs. As a result, these norms and the timing of certain transitions may vary between different social groups. The timing of these transitions, as Settersten and Hägestad (1996) have previously argued, is also shaped by social clocks which operate as 'prods and brakes' on certain behaviours which are often perceived, as well as experienced, as proscriptions for or against taking on certain roles at particular stages in the lifecourse (1996, p. 179). As such, it is possible for certain life events, such as the transition to parenthood, to be described or experienced by social actors as occurring either 'on time' or 'off time', be it 'early' or 'late'.

Research conducted by Daly (2011), which examined the perception of the 'right time' for motherhood amongst 32 middle-class women, found that women's feelings about being unmarried or non-mothers were mediated by the relational and reproductive behaviour of those around them. Thus, whilst open for renegotiation and individualisation, Daly noted how consensual perceptions about the ideal timing of lifecourse milestones such as marriage and parenthood continue to endure. However, Daly also crucially noted that when describing the

'right time' for motherhood, her participants did not refer to a particular age or age bracket but instead framed the right time as occurring when one 'felt ready' to take on the role of mother (2011, p. 270). Thus, whilst retaining some significance, norms in relation to the timing of parenthood have become untethered from specific ages or times in the lifecourse and instead, in part facilitated by developments in assisted reproductive technologies, have become linked to subjective perceptions of 'being ready' for parenthood (Daly & Bewley, 2013).

Other studies examining reproductive intentions have also reported how men and women commonly frame their 'readiness' for childbearing in terms of how prepared they perceive themselves to be to take on the role of a parent (Bergnéhr, 2007, 2009; Birch Petersen et al., 2016; Lampic et al., 2006; Sol Olafsdottir, Wikland, & Möller, 2011). Perceptions of such preparedness are often linked to whether individuals feel they have accumulated specific 'preconditions' for parenthood. These preconditions include material, cultural and relational resources which are seen as key to ensuring that both parents' and future children's needs can be met. Research examining reproductive timing has identified how factors such as having completed tertiary education or being employed in a stable job with secure income and thus being in a financially secure position to afford parenthood are seen as key preconditions for parenthood (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000; Tough, Benzies, Fraser-Lee, & Newburn-Cook, 2007; Wiebe, Chalmers, & Yager, 2012). Other significant factors identified include being entitled to the full scope of parental leave and sharing or owning a home suitable for childrearing (Bergnéhr, 2007, 2009; Birch Petersen et al., 2015; Lampic et al., 2006; Sol Olafsdottir et al., 2011).

Similar to findings from Daly (2011), many of the women I interviewed had assumed that they would have already become a mother by their current stage in the lifecourse. They also believed that the 'right time' for motherhood was not linked to a particular age but instead associated it with feeling 'ready' to have a child. Thus, the 'right time' for motherhood was not linked to notions of chronological age but was linked to many situational, social or personal factors which shaped their perception of their 'readiness' to parent. This included factors such as whether they had completed higher education, had attained a degree of stability through job and financial security, and whether they become emotionally prepared to commit to the role of parent. As Catrine described:

I have done a lot with my life. I have lived in a lot of places, most places in the world. I have travelled, studied, I have had interesting jobs, I have had a very full social life as well. I know I am at a point where I am ready to take it to the next level and I think, from what I hear, kids seem very rewarding but very tiring. But I am at a place where I am stable with personal finances and career is good and stable for now, so everything seems to be in order.

– Catrine (34 years)

Like Catrine, many of the participants in this research identified the achievement of financial security as important when considering motherhood and believed that this was best secured through the acquisition of qualifications and by establishing themselves within their chosen career prior to parenting. It was also often suggested that by preparing for motherhood in such a way they were best able to provide their child a secure and stable home.

I always knew that I never wanted to be in a position where I knew I would have to rely solely on a man for financial security and so, being career driven in that I always wanted to finish my education, I finished law school when I was 31 [...] I knew I wanted my education out of the way before I ever even considered getting married or having children.

— Rae (39 years)

In addition to preparing for motherhood through the acquisition of material and cultural resources such as a university degree and a stable income, many of the participants also identified how it was important to enjoy a period of life as a child-free adult before pursuing parenthood. This included engaging in international travel and other fulfilling life experiences that they believed motherhood may otherwise inhibit.

I was just so busy doing other things just having a great time, I wasn't ready for it [motherhood]. I wanted to live more, become more sure of my partner and experience other things [...] I am not saying when you have children your life is over, but when you have children your life changes a lot and I wanted to get that out of my system first.

— Catrine (34 years)

For me personally, I was ready [to become a mother] at 35 because I had travelled to most of the places I had wanted to go, I felt like I had experienced enough about life to have a kid. And even if I stayed home with a kid and had to work my ass off at some mundane job just to raise a kid I wouldn't have felt that I would be missing out. I think you need to get to a place where you are not going to resent the kid and some women have not done that [...] whereas I wanted to see the world, I wanted to do everything, I didn't want to have a kid and sort of think oh I am chained to this thing.

— Shu (39 years)

The importance of accruing life experiences such as travel, relationship building and personal growth prior to childbearing evident in the participants' accounts reflects cultural notions of individuals', but most notably

women's, lives changing irreparably following the transition to parenthood (Sevón, 2012). This common assumption, indeed social expectation, that before pursuing parenthood individuals should engage in a period of self-fulfilment and exploration has previously been explored by Bergnéhr (2007, 2009). Bergnéhr has noted how such a period of little responsibility prior to parenthood is perceived as important not just to enable time for self-development but also to prevent resentment and regret about missed experiences after taking on the role of parent. Nevertheless, the desire to engage in particular pursuits prior to parenting, particularly those related to professional employment and home ownership, reflects a highly individualised approach to the lifecourse. However, these desires and values are also significantly mediated by socio-economic and educational status. For the participants, motherhood at the wrong time, particularly too early, was seen as something which would have disrupted or curtailed the opportunities, experiences and freedoms they had experienced as young middle-class, and in some cases privileged, adults. By contrast, early motherhood for women from less economically and educationally empowered groups can be understood as a rational and positive decision (Sharpe, 2015). This is because, as Edin and Kefalas (2011) have previously observed, earlier childbearing is highly selective of girls whose family background, mental health status and school performance have already diminished their opportunities for middle-class ideals such as home ownership and professional employment to such an extent that an earlier transition to motherhood does little to further reduce their opportunities. Furthermore, for some such women the expectations of higher education, professional employment and international travel that remain so implicit to middle-class young women are little more than 'pipe dreams', whereas motherhood can offer a more tangible source of meaning and personal satisfaction (2011, p. 205).

Prior to embarking on parenting, it was important for the participants to accumulate specific material, cultural and relational resources, and the absence of one or more of these resources was sometimes seen to indicate that it was not yet the right time to pursue motherhood. However, preconditions such as home ownership, a secure job and economic stability can be increasingly difficult, as well as time consuming, to obtain in contemporary Britain. Recent decades have seen a decline in the 'job for life' model alongside a growth in precarious careers in a knowledge economy which increasingly requires individuals to spend longer periods of time in education prior to securing professional employment (Berrington, Stone, & Falkingham, 2009; Brown & Baker, 2012; Mills et al., 2011). Furthermore, recent years have also witnessed a growing gap between capital costs and incomes, and the possibility of home ownership now requires a dual-earning household to build large-enough deposits which are often unachievable until a person's mid-30s, if at all (Berrington et al., 2009; Daly & Bewley, 2013; Mills et al., 2011; Waldby, 2015). As a result, the social expectation that women should first invest in education, career building and financial stability prior to childbearing is significant especially given that the pursuit of such resources may span several

decades of a woman's life and may therefore only be achieved after her fertility has begun to decline. Consequently, when it comes to planning for motherhood, for some women a clear asynchrony can be identified between the right biological time for motherhood, which might be in a woman's 20s, and the right psycho-social time, which might be in her third or even fourth decade of life (Daly & Bewley, 2013; Perrier, 2013; Sevón, 2005).

Whilst many of the participants in this research identified the completion of education, attainment of stable careers and incomes and the acquisition of their own home as important to achieve prior to motherhood, this research found that they prioritised the establishment of a committed relationship with a male partner who was equally as invested in parenthood as themselves above all other preconditions. However, whilst the women had achieved some success and security in their professional lives and were often financially stable, had travelled and become emotionally ready to commit to motherhood, what they reported as 'absent' from their lives was a suitable partner with whom they could pursue parenthood. The importance of pursuing parenthood with a partner was reflected across all the participant accounts and the notion of the 'right' partner was particularly significant and appeared integral to the performing of parenthood in the way the women had envisaged or had hoped, which was as part of a traditional, two-parent family. As Lindie and Hayley articulated:

For me it's not about children, it's about having a family. It's about, what does children mean? It's the result of love, not the result of a sexual act, and for me it was very important to choose the right partner [...] You can go and have sex with anyone tomorrow, but for me it was being able to take my time to choose the right person rather than, just find somebody to have sex with and have a child.

— Lindie (34 years)

I believe in having, if at all possible, in having a nuclear family and having two parents, even if you are not married just having two parents in a stable loving household to bring them [children] up in.

— Hayley (38 years)

Thus, for many participants, the right time to become a mother was when they had achieved the preconditions as described above, but most importantly when they were part of a strong, permanent heterosexual relationship with a male partner who was also 'ready' and eager to pursue parenthood. The significance of being in a stable relationship with the right partner prior to childbearing has been identified in previous research as the most important precondition men and women consider when planning for parenthood (Benzies et al., 2006; Bergnéhr, 2007, 2009; Eriksson, Larsson, & Tydén, 2012; Sol Olafsdottir et al., 2011; Tough et al., 2007; Tydén et al., 2006; Wiebe et al., 2012). Furthermore, research has also indicated that the belief that their partner would be a good

parent, and was equally committed to childrearing, is also an important factor when considering having children (Benzies et al., 2006; Bergnéhr, 2007, 2009; Eriksson et al., 2012; Hammarberg et al., 2017; Sol Olafsdottir et al., 2011; Tough et al., 2007; Tydén et al., 2006; Wiebe et al., 2012). However, despite the shared desires of the participants to pursue motherhood as part of a secure, committed relationship, at the time of freezing their eggs as well as at the time of the interview, the majority of the participants had not found such a partnership. This led some of the women to suggest that they had come ‘off course’ from their lifecourse expectations and were now living a ‘life unexpected’.

3.1.1. *Living a ‘Life Unexpected’*

All the women in this research wanted to be part of a secure and committed relationship with a male partner, and many had assumed that by their current stage in the lifecourse they would have found such a partner, married and begun to have children. However, despite often being in long-term relationships in the past, the participants reported difficulties forming a lasting partnership leading to motherhood. For many of the women, their lack of a committed partner and difficulties finding such a relationship was a source of significant sadness and distress. As Charlotte and Leona described:

I always lived a really moral life. I’ve been, you know, [voice quivers] to me I think I’m a catch you know, low baggage, a lot of good things going for me, good family values and that stuff [...]. You know the feeling when you yearn for love, and you go through that, that feeling you know, and it’s hard, and this is a really hard age for me to feel like that.

– Charlotte (42 years)

I’ve found not being in a relationship really difficult to adjust to. [...] just for years and years I got really frustrated [...] I was boring my friends, wanting to have the ‘why isn’t this happening’ conversation all the time [...] I just couldn’t understand why it was happening for everybody else and not me.

– Leona (39 years)

The distress caused by the participants’ lack of such a relationship was often because the expectation of meeting a partner and having the opportunity to pursue motherhood had formed a central part of their anticipated lifecourse. As Rachel and Kanta explained:

You just assume that, you know, you get married, have babies and that’s the end of it. But you don’t really think about how it actually works and what may be the potential barriers to that happening.

– Rachel (34 years)

I just assumed when growing up that I would easily find somebody who wanted to marry me, and we would have as many children as we wanted, and you know that was just the complete assumption I made. So, it was a real shock and a real adjustment which took years of adjusting.

— Kanta (41 years)

Yet, for many of the participants these firmly held expectations did not reflect the path their own lives had taken, and instead the participants found themselves ‘off course’ from their own anticipated trajectory. As Aleen described:

I had my ideal person, my ideal job, the age I was going to be having a baby I had it worked out but none of it had actually come to fruition.

— Aleen (35 years)

The suggestion that participants’ lives had not ‘worked out’ the way they had planned was a common theme in the women’s accounts, with many of them remarking that they never expected to be without a partner at their current stage in life.

I think in my 20s I was really excited for what was coming but unfortunately it didn’t happen [...] I never even thought about this issue at 25, I thought life would work out.

— Charlotte (42 years)

This led several of the participants, such as Leona and Johanna, to express confusion about how they came to occupy such a position and question how they had ‘come off course’ with regard to the path they had expected their lives to take.

You start wondering why you are in this position, how this happened. Because, I don’t consider myself to be the person who is at the bottom of the tree [...] I am attractive, fit, fairly intelligent person, cultured person. How is it possible I don’t have a partner? How has that happened?

— Johanna (42 years)

As well as the anticipation of forming a stable and secure partnership, several participants also expressed how becoming a mother had been both an implicit expectation they held for themselves and also an expectation that others expected them to live up to. This led a small number of the participants to suggest that their non-adherence to these normative expectations led to stigma and social pressure as well as the sense of being ‘behind’ compared to their peers — many of whom had met a partner, married and had children.

With a lot of my older friends I have found it difficult to remain friends with them as they have gone on to have children, and so like I say I am not being ostracised but I guess I am distancing myself from people who have [had children], because firstly it's too painful and secondly it reinforces that feeling of you are not normal because everyone else is having kids and you can't be part of that.

– Kanta (41 years)

The time that I was freezing my eggs the norm in my friendship group was to at least have started having children, if not finished by then!

– Olivia (37 years)

The pressure to achieve the 'ideals' of marriage and motherhood was felt more acutely by Kanta and Preeti whose religious and family backgrounds meant their non-adherence to such normative lifecourse expectations was highly visible and contrary to the expectations of their extended family and communities. They explained:

I am from an Indian background and the traditional thing to do is to get married when you are younger [...] there is a biological and a social imperative as well where you feel like you haven't done the normal thing if you don't have kids.

– Kanta (41 years)

I think there is a stigma attached to it isn't there? Especially in the Asian background, it's like 'well your daughter is not married why is that?' kind of thing. Even though I am not the only one, but there is that stigma attached to that.

– Preeti (37 years)

Despite often being aware and proud of their own achievements in work and other aspects of their personal lives, the participants' lack of a partner led several to express how they felt like a 'failure'. As Aleen and Olivia explained:

I feel a lot like I am a failure, but I am not because I have a really good job. I have got lots of friends. I have kind of travelled the world. But on another level, I am, like I don't have a partner, I don't have children, so you are a failure.

– Aleen (35 years)

You feel guilty anyway, or that you have failed anyway, because you haven't met your life partner and had children. Even if it's not explicit, and my family never made me feel like 'what are you

messing about at?'; you know you're not settling down like your friends, but masses of unspoken social pressure all the time [...] well, I felt there was anyway.

— Olivia (37 years)

The participants' sense of being a failure for not adhering to a life script which included marriage and motherhood is highly reflective of a cultural context which still presents motherhood not only as a signifier of adulthood (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007) but as the cornerstone of adult femininity and what it means to be a woman (Gillespie, 2003; Russo, 1976; Sevón, 2005). As such, the participants' lack of a partner with whom they could pursue parenthood was experienced by some as a failed lifecourse transition which presented a disruption to their lifecourse expectations. However, by drawing on egg freezing these women were hoping to manage not only the disruption that their lack of a partner currently posed to their reproductive intentions but also the disruption that age-related fertility decline may pose to their parenting ambitions in the future. Thus, for these women egg freezing had the potential to maintain the possibility of making the transition to motherhood with a chosen partner in the future, thereby enabling women to still adhere to the lifecourse expectation they had held for themselves. Instead of continuing to live the 'life unexpected' (Day, 2016) the participants hoped that they would instead have the opportunity to experience motherhood as part of their newly extended reproductive timeline.

3.2. Perceptions and Representations of Older Motherhood

It is highly likely that should any 35+ -year-old first-time mother-to-be spend any significant amount of time inspecting her maternity notes, she will notice the term 'elderly-primigravida' on her file. This term denotes the fact that she is considered to be of 'advanced maternal age' and thus may have an increased risk of complications during her pregnancy and when giving birth. These women, as well as 'elderly multigravida' (women experiencing their second or subsequent pregnancy at the age of 35+), are more commonly referred to, once they give birth, as 'older mothers'. Older motherhood is not a new social practice; indeed, it was common between the 1920s and 1940s for women to have children well into their 40s with the average age of motherhood at this point in history bearing similarities to what has been observed in recent cohorts of women (ONS, 2015, 2018; Thompson, Hawkins, Dar, & Taylor, 2012).² However, what is particular to the current socio-historic moment is the increasing numbers of women

²The average age of motherhood in 1944 was 29.3 years compared to 30.5 years in 2017 (ONS, 2015, 2018). The fertility rate among women aged 40–44 was at its highest in 1947, long before the development of assisted reproductive technologies, when it peaked at 19 births per thousand women (Thompson, Hawkins, Dar, & Taylor, 2012). By comparison, in 2017 there were 16.1 births per thousand to women aged between 40 and 44 (ONS, 2018).

seemingly 'electing' to begin to pursue motherhood later in life enabled not only by technologies of contraception but also by technologies of assisted reproduction (Friese, Becker, & Nachtigall, 2008). A relatively recent social construction in Euro-American culture, older motherhood entered medical discourse during the twentieth century due to the risks advanced maternal age was seen to pose to a foetus (Hanson, 2003; Nwandison & Bewley, 2006). It is perhaps in part of the risks associated with older motherhood that this practice has often been discussed and viewed in negative terms (Budds, Locke, & Burr, 2013). However, the negative framing of older motherhood no doubt also stems from the way in which older mothers are represented as challenging dominant ideologies of good mothering. This is particularly the case with much older mothers (women in their 50s and 60s) or postmenopausal women using assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) to conceive (Cutas, 2007; Smajdor, 2008). These women, like other 'undesirable mothers' such as single or teenage mothers (Elliott, Powell, & Brenton, 2015; Tyler, 2008), have been framed in social policy and discourse as 'bad mothers' who are positioned outside of mothering ideals due to the way they violate the notion of the 'good mother' as one who is selfless and able to put the needs of her child above her own.

At the time of data collection, most participants in this research were 35 years of age or older and as such would be regarded as an older mother should they become a parent in the future. Despite media portrayals of older mothers as deviant and undesirable due to the way they are positioned as unable to engage fully in the demanding practices of mothering (Budds et al., 2013; Shaw & Giles, 2009), very few of the participants perceived 'older motherhood' as problematic. Indeed, all the participants expressed a belief that motherhood at an older age would be beneficial to both themselves and their future offspring often referencing the increased amount of resources they felt they were likely to have at their disposal compared to a younger woman.

From a personal standpoint do I think I have got the ability now to care and financially look after a child and to give it the best start in life with all the things I would want it to have [...] Could I have done that in my 20s?

— Aleen (35 years)

I know for me, just to be honest with you, just from a financial standpoint [...]. I feel like where I'm at financially, it gives me the ability and the freedom to have a lot more options when having a child.

— Charlotte (42 years)

Furthermore, whilst recognising that their older age may mean that they could have less energy than their younger counterparts, they argued that their maturity meant that they were better emotionally equipped for the commitment that motherhood required and suggest that they would not be missing out on

other life experiences as a result of becoming a mother. Being older had given them not only a good financial standing but more wisdom and patience, which they saw as important characteristics for mothers.

I think I am probably emotionally in a better state to raise kids at this age than what I would have been if I was younger. I think I have more financial stability now finally and I don't have that feeling like, if I have a baby and I can't go to a party for two years, who cares?!

— Claudia (41 years)

I earn substantially more money than I did when I was 31, I have got a lot more patience that I had when I was younger, and I feel I have gone out enough, been to parties. I am really quite ready to change my lifestyle to have a child rather than feel any resentment about that.

— Patricia (41 years)

Thus, many of the participants suggested that having children at an older age actually conferred many advantages and was preferable to younger motherhood. They also pointed to how first-time motherhood at or after the age of 35 or older was often considered 'normal' in their particular social circles.

Most of my friends had kids when they were older than 35 so it doesn't really bother me.

— Holly (38 years)

Living in an area like this you see so many yummy mummies in their forties walking around. [Local area name] is the total yummy mummy area. If you walk down towards the park the place is just dogs and yummy mummies. And you see so many women who look much older than me as parents, so you feel the norms have changed a bit. And while medically I might be considered an older mother I wouldn't consider myself to be an 'old-old mother', I am just an average mother.

— Hayley (38 years)

However, as the quote above from Hayley indicates, whilst the participants saw benefits in becoming a mother at an older age, they equally didn't want to become an 'old-old mother' and thus perceived there to be a 'social deadline' by which to have a child. This deadline was one marked not by the medical risks of age-related fertility decline but by the perception that parenting would be harder to perform effectively after a certain age as well as the suggestion that it was important to, as Johanna put it, 'be around for a significant part of my child's life'.

I had decided that I perhaps wouldn't want to be a mother older than 45 [...] I just sort of think well 45, you know, the child would be 20 when I am 65. I would like to be around for a significant part of my child's life. I think it would be perhaps cruel to start out knowing that you are not going to be around for them for that long.

– Johanna (42 years)

I don't really want to be 10 years on from now and still trying to conceive. I don't think it's wrong, and I don't judge anyone who is doing it, but I just think it's better to get it done when you are a bit younger because of your energy and how long you live.

– Patricia (41 years)

The benefits the participants identified as associated with older motherhood were often linked to how it allowed them to more closely identify with dominant ideologies of good mothering and align themselves with those within the charmed circle of heterosexual, appropriately aged, economically stable, married mothers (Bock, 2000). However, whilst it was common for the participants to justify their claim to be able to engage in 'good mothering' by emphasising their access to different forms of capital, they were aware that as they aged their purchase on such claims waned. This led some of the women to comment on what they perceived to be a 'double standard' in the way in which older motherhood and older fatherhood were discussed in media discourse, as Amber stated:

I find it really sexist. It makes me really angry actually, because you can be a man and be 80 and what is it Michael Douglas with his children, that's perfectly acceptable but the press can be almost quite venomous actually in terms of older mums.

– Amber (39 years)

Also, men right, they can have kids when they are 70, and it's also interesting how they get almost applauded when they [...] ohhh you buy them a drink at the bar right. If a woman had a kid at 40/45, it's like 'oh she is so old how is she going to do that'. I think that that is very discriminatory.

– Catrine (34 years)

The double standard the participants perceived between the way older fathers, compared to older mothers, were discussed in public discourse may be partly explained by the biological variance between women's and men's fertility which sees women become peri-menopausal as early as their mid-30s with men suffering little to no decline in the quantity or quality of their sperm until they reach their fifth decade of life. However, it is also possible that older fatherhood provokes less of a reaction due to (unequal) gendered expectations about the

burden of care. Indeed, even though men are increasingly expected to perform the role of ‘hands on father’ (Hinton & Miller, 2013), the burden of childrearing continues to fall disproportionately on women. This renders the age of the father relatively unproblematic as it is not he who is expected to engage the most significantly in the emotionally and physically intensive process of childrearing and thus he does not pose a ‘threat’ to the practice of parenting.

3.3. Problematising the ‘Choice’ to Delay Pregnancy

The concept of ‘delayed’ motherhood is often found alongside the discussion of older motherhood, and the two terms are often homogenised in news or lay discussion of reproductive timing. Despite greater understanding in academic literature of the nuances affecting the timing of parenthood, wider discourse around delayed motherhood commonly suggests that, bolstered by contraceptive technologies, women are able to simply choose when to become a mother (Lowe, 2016). This idea that women can pursue pregnancy at a time of their choosing has given rise to the notion that older mothers have actively elected to ‘delay’, ‘put off’ or ‘defer’ motherhood until later in the lifecourse. The implications of this being that older mothers are perceived to have chosen to have children later in life and have thus also elected to attempt pregnancy outside of the biologically optimum time, with the associated risks to themselves and their babies (Budds et al., 2013). However, research examining women’s accounts of reproductive timing and older motherhood has demonstrated that motherhood later on in life is often not the outcome of deliberative choice and planning but is a result of various factors often outside of an individual woman’s control (Cooke, Mills, & Lavender, 2010, 2012; Jarvie, Letherby, & Stenhouse, 2015). Such a finding was certainly reflected in the accounts of women interviewed for this research who commonly described how the transition to motherhood was not something that they had deliberately ‘put off’ or ‘avoided’, but rather they had yet to be in a position where they felt able to pursue motherhood, often due to the lack of a suitable partner. As Livvy explained:

I mean for me it’s important to say it’s not a selfish thing about putting off motherhood. If I had been in the right place and the right time in my mid-20s I would have got pregnant. But you know life doesn’t work like that and, you know, I think it would have been more selfish to have a baby when you are not with the person you wanna raise that child with.

– Livvy (37 years)

For some of the participants, such as Aleen, delayed motherhood was more meaningfully understood as deciding not to become a parent in circumstances where parenthood ‘was’ an option, where the right situation and right time for motherhood had come together. She told me:

I think I would think more ‘delaying it’ if I was with a partner and we thought for socio-economic reasons or whatever we are going to go travelling go and live somewhere else and thought right ok we don’t want children yet so we will freeze our eggs and have a go in maybe two years’ time. To me that would be delaying it, as I could do it now in the way that I want but I am choosing not to. But the way I look at it, for me, I can’t do it now although that I want to, therefore I am just, it’s not delaying it.

— Aleen (35 years)

Many of the participants thus believed they had not prioritised other parts of their lives over motherhood, but instead stated that they had never been in the situation where they felt motherhood was a viable option. As Johanna explained:

I don’t think it’s a choice that I have made [...] well, ok devil’s advocate, ok it’s a choice I have made because I have chosen not to be with certain people. I have made the choice of wanting to be with someone that I want to be with, or that I see as someone I can have that relationship with. I have chosen to create this idea of my perfect relationship to do that. But it’s not like I have been in a situation where I have been in a great relationship where everything has been comfortable, and I have gone oh actually no this year I want to have a holiday, I want to buy another house, I want to do something more with my career.

— Johanna (42 years)

Even though many of the participants felt a strong desire to become a mother, many had not yet attempted conception because the way in which the participants wanted to perform motherhood, which was under the right circumstances and with the right person, was not possible. Thus, what had prevented women becoming mothers in many cases was, as Johanna described, the inability to:

Marry up the idea of what that situation should be like, to actually form that relationship, that basis, that foundation.

— Johanna (42 years)

Aleen made a similar point in the quote above, when she talked about doing motherhood in ‘the way that I want’. However, Johanna, as well as several other of the participants in this research, noted how their desire to ‘do motherhood’ in a particular way was perhaps problematic. She noted:

I think maybe through one wanting to do it properly you actually make it so difficult and you can’t actually do it.

— Johanna (42 years)

A similar observation was also made by Hayley who explained:

I suppose I think to myself that's the best way to be a mother, to be in a stable relationship and be financially secure and be able to provide for your child. But I do sometimes look around me on a bus or whatever and think oh my god everyone has got children and they haven't bothered getting a career or trying to earn enough money or have a nice flat, they are just getting on with it.

– Hayley (38 years)

It was apparent that many of the participants felt their current childlessness would be perceived by others as an outcome of personal choice. Several of them also discussed the way the media represented women such as themselves as choosing to delay motherhood for career reasons. As a result, a large number of the women were keen to convey that their working life or career had not influenced their decision-making regarding motherhood. As Patricia and Helena explained:

I think the media really misrepresent women who have children later. I don't know a single woman who has put off having babies because of her career, not a single woman I have ever met has that been true for. The women that I know that don't have kids is because they have not got the right partner.

– Patricia (41 years)

I wouldn't say it was my career which kept me from it [motherhood]. I would say there was never a moment, from say the moment I turned 30, where I have been in a relationship that have been strong enough to say ok let us consider that.

– Helena (37 years)

Sofia offered an alternative explanation for the suggestion that 'career women' delayed motherhood. She proposed that career success or development was not a cause of delayed motherhood but rather an outcome of not being in a relationship or having a family. She explained:

I think a lot of women have succeeded in their careers because they haven't found a partner and they haven't had children, and therefore they have all the time in their hands to focus on their careers. So that's more a consequence than a cause. I think that that is at least what happened to me.

– Sofia (39 years)

As Petropanagos has previously noted, the suggestion that women can simply choose when to have children 'boasts ignorance of the social structures that shape, confine and influence the choices women make' (2010, p. 57). However,

despite research identifying the social, structural and relational constraints on women's reproductive decision-making, dominant discourses about women's ability to 'choose' when to have children have nevertheless meant that those who become mothers at the 'wrong' time, be that too early or too late, endure criticism for their 'inappropriate' reproductive choices (Budds et al., 2013; Smajdor, 2009). This can be seen, as discussed above, in media discourses which commonly construct older mothers, particularly those who use ARTs to conceive, as 'selfish', 'risky' and 'unnatural' (Budds et al., 2013; Campbell, 2011; Hadfield, Rudoe, & Sanderson-Mann, 2007; Shaw & Giles, 2009). This has led some feminist authors to suggest that there is an 'illusion of choice' in relation to motherhood, as whilst women are said to have freedom of choice about when, or if, to pursue motherhood; in reality this choice is shaped and constrained not only by 'biological clocks' linked to women's fertility but by 'social clocks' about the appropriate timing of 'good motherhood' – the performance of which is often linked to the ability to engage in practices of intensive mothering (Budds et al., 2013; Earle & Letherby, 2002).

As this chapter has demonstrated, for many of the participants, marriage and motherhood had been eventual lifecourse expectations which they had not only held for themselves but which they believed others had expected them to achieve. As such, their non-mother and single status was often the source of much sadness, but also confusion and shame.

Women described being surprised to have found themselves 'off course' from their own expectations about how they had anticipated their lives would unfold and explained how they were now living a 'life unexpected'. However, it remained important for these women to maintain the possibility of genetic motherhood with a chosen partner in the future who also shared a genetic relationship with their child. As such, the participants drew on egg freezing to not only conserve their genetic relationship to their potential future child but enable them to pursue motherhood as part of a newly extended reproductive timeline with a chosen partner. In doing so they hoped that social egg freezing would allow them to partake in culturally valorised processes of family building at a time in their lives when natural fertility decline would have otherwise precluded such an option. Drawing on participant accounts of reproductive timing, this chapter has challenged the notion that women simply choose to delay motherhood enabled by technologies of contraception and has instead highlighted how the timing of motherhood was often shaped by factors beyond the control of women as individuals. Finally, this chapter has demonstrated how for some women, older motherhood was seen to confer multiple advantages. Indeed, participants articulated that by becoming a mother at an older age their emotional maturity and financial stability would mean they would be more patient and committed to the mothering process which they believed would ultimately make them better mothers.