



‘An insufferable burden on businesses?’ On changing attitudes to maternity leave and economic-related issues in the *Times* and *Daily Mail*

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the ways in which maternity leave has been reported, within the broader context of economic inequality, in the periods from 1971 to 1977 and from 1997 to 2001, in the right-of-centre British national press. The aim is to answer the following research questions: Has the representation of maternity leave changed in the right-of-centre UK press with the adoption of new policies, particularly in relation to economic matters? If so, in what ways? Discussions of maternity leave in newspapers are identified by uses of the phrase *maternity leave*. Selected findings are presented from a corpus compiled for this study of news stories (641,996 words) in the *Times* and the *Daily Mail*, in the years in which maternity leave policies were changed in the UK (1973, 1975, 1999) plus two years before and after. Combining qualitative with quantitative methods, the analysis shows that maternity leave becomes monetized in the later period, from 1997 to 2001. The economic term that undergoes the most noticeable shift in frequency of use is *afford*, which is used five-times more frequently in the 1997–2001 period. A close reading of all those stories containing the term *afford* reveals considerable opposition in these newspapers to the introduction of new entitlements for women with new-borns, a hostility that was not apparent when improvements to maternity leave provisions were first introduced in the 1970s. This paper addresses the representation of maternity leave in the belief that this system benefit (like any other state-backed benefit in the UK system) helps in mitigating wealth inequality. It is part of a larger study exploring changes in the way in which British newspapers have represented wealth inequality in the UK from 1971 to the present.

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1. Introduction

This paper is part of a larger project wherein corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis are combined to analyse British press representations of wealth inequality over the past 45 years.¹ As extensively recognised by economists and historians, there is considerably greater economic inequality in the UK today than there was in the 1970s.² Indices of this include the reduced share of national income that goes to the less affluent (only 8% of the wage growth having gone to the lowest earners, Mount, 2012: 7), the steady increase of relative poverty since the 1980s, the decrease in the proportion of Gross Domestic Product made up of wages (from

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¹ This project is called *Tracking Discoursal Shift in News Media Representation of Economic Inequality: Developing and Applying Corpus Linguistic and Critical Discourse Analysis Methods* (abbreviated as DINEQ) and it is funded by the European Commission (Horizon 2020-MARIE SKŁODOWSKA-CURIE ACTIONS, grant reference 705247).

² See Cribb et al. (2012), Hills and Stewart (2005), Lansley (2012), Stiglitz (2012), Marquand (2013), Westergaard (2012) and Wilkinson and Pickett (2009).

63% to 53.3% between 1975 and 2008) and a more unequal wealth distribution, with the top 10% owning 100 times more than the bottom 10% (Rowlingson, 2012: 3) (Toolan, forthcoming). While some of the economic inequality drivers cannot be directly addressed, the majority of them are manageable factors where policies play an important role, as with unemployment, investment, education or the taxation system. This paper addresses the representation of economic inequality in relation to maternity leave, on the assumption that maternity leave policies, like other state-backed benefits in the UK, are directly related to wealth and economy, and are indicative of the state's intervention in the pursuit of a fairer provision for all citizens than they would otherwise obtain.

Maternity leave provision has improved progressively in the UK since it was first established in the 1970s, with significant changes in 1973, 1975 and 1999 (Long, 2012). At present, all women in the UK who become pregnant are legally entitled to up to 52 weeks of statutory maternity leave, the first 39 also including statutory maternity pay (SMP henceforth). SMP consists of 90% of weekly earnings in the first 6 weeks, 90% of weekly earnings or £140.98 a week (whichever is lower) in weeks 7–39, and leave without

statutory pay for weeks 40–52 (Glassdoor, 2016). Maternity leave provision, as with other system benefits, is used to mitigate some forms of inequality: women having babies without the benefit of maternity leave may find themselves (and the child) penalized, whether they return to work rapidly or resign from their post.

In line with the socio-constructionist theory (Fowler, 1991; van Dijk, 1988, 1998; Fairclough, 1992, 1995), this paper assumes that mass media discourses impact significantly upon society, in that they not only report factual information, but also contribute to changes in societal attitudes and to expectations towards different issues. They do so by displaying new attitudes as habitual, the new 'normal' and common sense, and by making readers perceive societal changes as inevitable, thus making them less resistant to such changes. In this project we hypothesise that these 'naturalising' tendencies may be stronger in news media which support and welcome the political and economic changes that have rendered the UK a less egalitarian society today: the right-of-centre UK press. While the overall objective is to investigate discursive changes surrounding economic inequality, this paper specifically aims to analyse possible shifts in the representation of maternity leave in the right-of-centre UK press. Thus, the following research questions are addressed: Has the representation of maternity leave changed in the right-of-centre UK press when new policies have been adopted in Britain? If so, how?

2. Class (and motherhood) discourses in the media: previous approaches

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA henceforth) is based on several assumptions, namely that: (1) power relations are discursive, (2) discourse constitutes society and culture, (3) discourse does ideological work, (4) the link between text and society is mediated, (5) discourse is a form of social power, and (6) discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory (van Dijk, 2015: 467). Above all of them, CDA addresses social problems, and so it can clarify our understanding of forms of *social inequality* relating to factors such as age, class (Toolan, 2016), religion (Baker et al., 2013), sexual orientation, race, country of origin (Baker et al., 2008), gender (Caldas-Coulthard and Moon, 2010; Baker, 2014) and, particularly, motherhood (see MacKenzie, 2017; Jaworska, 2018). In this sense, research on class discourses in the media has emerged in recent years, mostly from a neoliberal perspective of the inequalities of contemporary capitalism. Baker and McEnery (2015), for instance, identify three main discourses when analysing Twitter responses to the TV programme *Benefits Street*: the idle poor discourse, the poor as victim discourse, and the rich get richer discourse. User responses to the programme have also been inspected by van der Bom et al. (2018), who found that benefit claimants are described as *scroungers*, as exhibiting inappropriate behaviour, and as a flawed underclass. The image of benefit claimants displayed in these studies contrasts with one concerning a campaign on council housing, where the hegemonic discourse of underclass is substituted by one that portrays council tenants as ordinary people (Watt, 2008). News and politics media also seem to reproduce similar discourses. Jacobsson and Ekstrom (2016) discovered that the news displayed workers and citizens as only able to hope, cope and shop, during the crisis in the Swedish labour market. The denial of class struggle in Britain from the late seventies in the anti-union political discourse (Ortu, 2008), and the idea that class differences are something we choose – as evident in Cameron's and Miliband's responses to the Occupy protest movement (Bennett, 2013) – are also relevant approaches to this study. The recent work by Toolan (2016), involving a comparative, diachronic, corpus-assisted CDA of TV programme reviews in the *Daily Mail* by Peter Black in 1971

and Christopher Stevens in 2013, also proves a significant contribution to the topic. From the analysis of the latter reviews, Toolan suggests that class has disappeared from the discursive agenda in contemporary Britain, and that avoiding a discussion about class and wealth inequality at present in *Daily Mail* TV reviews seems natural. He also argues that the discourse on wealth inequality should be more central to CDA than other forms of discrimination, as findings suggest that this realm of inequality is more discursively accepted than others (2016). In his forthcoming book, Toolan reiterates this idea, claiming that "the wider divide [...] between the rich and poor in this country, and which is probably growing yet larger, is causing and will continue to cause great harm" (Toolan, forthcoming). These publications highlight class differences in UK society today and the need for CDA to focus on wealth inequality. However, studies have yet to consider the interplay between class discourses and attitudes towards motherhood, a gap that this paper aims to fill.

3. Method and data

To investigate discourse surrounding maternity leave in the British press, this study used data from a newspaper corpus which includes the query phrase *maternity leave*, in two national UK newspapers, the *Times* and the *Daily Mail*, from 1971 to 1977 and from 1997 to 2001. The corpus compiled for this project contained 641,996 words and 773 news stories. The newspapers were selected as representative samples of a broad, rightward moving, socioeconomic trend, and included both tabloid and broadsheet journalism. The time periods were chosen because new maternity leave policies were adopted in Britain in 1973, 1975 and 1999, so, presumably, maternity leave became particularly newsworthy prior to, during and following these changes. Stories were downloaded from two different online sources: Gale Learning (2017a, 2017b) for the 1971–1977 period and Nexis UK (2017) for the 1997–2001. *Maternity leave* was used as the query phrase to select any section of relevant articles on the assumption that newspapers contribute to changes in people's attitudes towards societal issues, and that this influence does not come from specific genres within publications, but from publications as a whole. Though particular sections may exert more influence, where opinion is more evidently displayed (editorials, for example), the impact newspapers have on readers and society in general may also come from any other text that is printed and, therefore, accessible to the readers. Thus, editorials or news stories containing this phrase were collected, but so too were letters to the editor and other sub-genres. Once downloaded, stories were formatted into plain .txt files and labelled by newspaper (TT for the *Times*, DM for the *Daily Mail*), date of publication, and surname of author (if known, otherwise 'unknown'), e.g. '19970805-TT-Unknown'.

Given that the aim was to examine possible changes in discussions surrounding maternity leave, particularly in relation to economic matters, the frequencies of use of some economic terms were first compared across the two periods under consideration. The terms compared were *class* (adj./n./v.), *afford*, *cost* (n./v.), *poverty*, *poor* (adj./n.), *rich* (adj./n.), *wealth*, and *wealthy*. These terms came from a network of words and phrases previously drawn up as part of the wider project, on the assumption that they directly relate to wealth and to economic issues. After uploading the 1971–1977 subcorpus in Antconc 3.5.2 (Anthony, 2018), a concordance was prepared for each term, with items pruned to retain only those referencing economic issues. For instance, for *class*, references to a *second-class degree in law*, to *two first class stamps for postage*, and to a *world-class pentathlete* were set aside. The process was then repeated for the 1997–2001 subcorpus. The final raw frequencies for the two subcorpora were compared to see which particular economic terms had suffered a noticeable change in

frequency over time. This was achieved by calculating the log-ratio (Hardie, 2014) through Rayson's (2016) Excel spreadsheet tool. The log-ratio was used because this statistical measure reveals "how big the difference between two corpora is for a particular keyword" (Hardie, 2014). As Hardie (2014) explains, "log-likelihood is a statistical significance measure – it doesn't tell us how big/how important a given difference is". By contrast, log-ratio is an "effect-size statistic and, therefore, does represent how big the difference between two corpora is for a particular keyword".³

The first, quantitative part of the analysis revealed some changes in the representation of maternity leave over time, but also suggested potential sites of interest in the corpus. The biggest difference in the frequency of use applied to the use of the term *afford*. The analysis therefore continued with a smaller, representative data set consisting of all the concordances of *afford*, in search of underlying ideologies underpinned by propositions (van Dijk, 1995). Propositions are linguistic structures that represent meanings of sentences and discourse. They are normally expressed by single sentences or clauses and can be ideologically controlled in different ways (e.g. modalities, predicates, semantic roles...) (van Dijk, 1995: 258). An example of a proposition is "Andrew passed his exam". According to van Dijk, propositions relate to meanings at the local level, and constitute what he describes as *macrostructures*, which more broadly refer to topics or themes (1995: 258). Both propositions and macrostructures constitute hierarchical relations that "can be defined by *macrorules*, which represent what we intuitively understand by summarizing" (1995: 259). In order to identify propositions and macrostructures, all the concordance hits of *afford* were searched in Antconc and read in KWIC display through the concordance tool. A search window size of 50 characters was used to read them. If the information retrieved in KWIC format provided insufficient context, then the concordance hits were expanded to file view, to enable the surrounding sentences and paragraphs to be read meaningfully. Finally, the relevant propositions were identified by following a process of recursive summarizing (van Dijk, 1995). This consisted of (1) deleting irrelevant information in the corpora, (2) recursively generalizing a group of propositions into one macroproposition and (3) replacing propositions indicating auxiliary information by one macroproposition that describes the event as a whole. These are the three processes or macro rules that allow information to be reduced to topics (or macrostructures) in a text, according to van Dijk (1995: 32). This final step, combining quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis, facilitated an investigation into the narrative surrounding maternity leave, the notion of affordability in these stories and, particularly, the way the notion of affordability changed between the 1970s and the late 1990s–early 2000s.

4. Results and discussions

4.1. Statistical results: the monetisation of maternity leave between 1997 and 2001

Statistical results show that there is an overall trend for economic terms such as *wealthy* (1.73), *rich* (adj.) (1.30), or *poverty* (1.19) (see Table 1) to have positive log-ratio values over the periods under comparison. Positive log-ratio values are also evident in terms such as *rich* (n.) (0.80), *cost* (v.) (0.43), *poor* (adj.) (0.25), or *class* (adj.) (0.16), although values are not as high in these cases. By contrast, only 4 terms out of 13 have negative log-ratio values. With few exceptions, therefore, the economic terms were generally more common in the news stories discussing maternity leave in the *Times* and *Daily Mail* between 1997 and 2001 than between

1971 and 1977. Within these overall results, the most marked frequency advance is that of the term *afford*, which has a log ratio value of 2.42. A ratio of 1 implies that a particular word is twice as common in one corpus than in the other (Hardie, 2014). With a log ratio value of 2.42, *afford* is roughly 5 times as common in the news stories published from 1997 to 2001 than in the stories published between 1971 and 1977.

By looking at these figures it is possible to identify shifts in the relative frequency of use of these terms. Concretely, statistical results and log ratio calculation (Hardie, 2014; Gabrielatos, 2018) reveal that, with very few exceptions, the relative frequency of use of these terms has increased. This may suggest that, in more recent years, the *Times* and the *Daily Mail* have displayed a particular discourse surrounding maternity leave which was more concerned with economic and class matters than it was between 1971 and 1977. *Wealthy*, *rich* and *poverty* are some examples of this trend, but the case of *afford* is particularly relevant here, as initial figures reveal that while this verb was used only once between 1971 and 1977 – and not in relation to maternity leave in the UK – it was used on 37 different occasions in these two newspapers when discussing maternity leave between 1997 and 2001. Statistically speaking, the log ratio value of *afford* is the highest of all the terms with economic implications inspected, which means that the use of this term has changed most, in terms of relative frequency, between the two periods under consideration. The rise in the frequency of usage of economic terms in the later period may be explained on the grounds that the presence of women of childbearing age in the labour market has become stronger over time, thus making things economically harder for businesses and the government. Nonetheless, the increase in the frequency of use of these terms is extensive and, especially in cases like *afford*, *cost* (v.), *poverty* and *wealthy*, the shift becomes dramatic. Overall, these statistical findings suggest that discussion of maternity leave became monetised in the late 1990s and early 2000s, by comparison to the 1970s, when nobody questioned (or even mentioned) the affordability or otherwise of this social benefit.

4.2. Contextual results: the (un)affordability of maternity leave policies improvements

Initial results in the previous section give an overview of how maternity leave is seen in relation to economic issues, i.e. discussion of maternity leave is more monetised in the later period. A close reading of the concordances of *afford* and its contextual behaviour reveals further insights into the topic, as will be shown. Although concordances were inspected in KWIC context in Antconc (Anthony, 2018), all the graphological sentences that contain *afford* in the corpora are reproduced in the appendices (plus the preceding or the following sentence, if required to facilitate understanding).

The only use of *afford* in the *Times* and *Daily Mail* in relation to maternity leave in the stories from 1971 to 1977 is not relevant to this study, as it does not relate to the situation in the UK, but to benefits provided by the North Korean government as declared in their constitution (see Appendix A). The *Times* published the constitution of North Korea in December 1974, though it was originally passed in 1972. By contrast, the 37 uses of *afford* in relation to maternity leave in the same newspapers in the late 90s and early 00s are all relevant (see Appendix B). By analysing all these instances in their contexts, it is possible to deduce a particular discourse that can be summarized into 2 macro propositions: (1) "Mothers-to-be face many problems" and (2) "Improving maternity leave policies leads mostly to negative consequences". These macropropositions and the constituent propositions are explored and developed within in the following subsections.

³ On log-ratio, see also Gabrielatos (2018).

Table 1

Comparison of frequency of use of economic terms in the two subcorpora.

	Observed frequencies		Over/under-use	Log Likelihood	Normalised frequencies		
	1997–2001	1971–1977			1997–2001	1971–1977	Log Ratio
Class (adj.)	31	4	+	0.05	0.00006	0.00005	0.16
Class (n.)	38	15	–	9.18	0.00007	0.00018	–1.45
Class (v.)	1	0	+	0.27	0.00000	0.00000	–1.79
Afford	36	1	+	4.67	0.00007	0.00001	2.42
Cost (n.)	155	23	–	0.01	0.00028	0.00028	–0.04
Cost (v.)	65	7	+	0.59	0.00012	0.00009	0.43
Poverty	79	5	+		0.00014	0.00006	1.19
Poor (adj.)	41	5	+		0.00007	0.00006	0.25
Poor (n.)	16	2	+		0.00003	0.00002	0.21
Rich (adj.)	17	1	+		0.00003	0.00001	1.30
Rich (n.)	6	0	+		0.00001	0.00000	0.80
Wealth	13	8	–		0.00002	0.00010	–2.09
Wealthy	23	1	+		0.00004	0.00001	1.73

4.2.1. Macroproposition 1: “Mothers-to-be face many problems”

Any macroproposition, according to van Dijk (1988: 31), is characterized by means of constituent propositions, that is, “the smallest, independent meaning constructs of language and thoughts”. Thus, the first macrostructure underpinned in the discourse surrounding maternity leave and affordability in the *Times* and *Daily Mail* from 1997 to 2001, that women who become pregnant have many struggles, is built of 4 propositions:

“Mothers-to-be have financial issues”

“Mothers experience difficulties combining personal life and work”

“Mothers have doubts about whether to return to work or not after ML”

“ML policies lead to a wider economic gap between affluent and low income mothers”

The first thing to note is that pregnancy is identified with financial problems in the stories selected, as observed in the proposition “SMP is quite low” (in #21) and expanded in the following sample:

‘SMP comes as a big shock to women who have always worked. [...] Families on low incomes are entitled to a one-off payment of £100 to help towards the cost of a new baby. Single parents may also claim income support and couples’ family credit. However, the loss of earnings during maternity leave can spark financial difficulties even for families on higher incomes. [...]’ (19980808-TT-Emmet)

A quick inspection of the 12 concordances of *SMP* in these stories also reveals additional instances of this proposition:

1. *SMP comes as a big shock* to women who have always worked [my emphasis].
2. Many mothers are forced to go back early because they are the sole or main breadwinner, and *the luxury of taking their full minimum entitlement of 18 weeks is impossible because they cannot exist on the statutory maternity pay* [my emphasis].
3. ‘Many women want to take more time with their babies but *cannot afford to because statutory maternity pay is too low*,’ Miss Harman said yesterday [my emphasis].

Additionally, 6 of the 12 concordances of *SMP* also suggest that “some women are not entitled to SMP”. All of them come in a very informative piece written by Maternity Alliance in the *Times* (August 1998), some months after the introduction of the new legal rights. The piece claims that “Many mothers cannot afford low SMP or no SMP” (this is mentioned in #8, #11, #15, #16, #19, #20, #21, #23, #29, #31, #32, #34) and, as a consequence, “More mothers are returning to work as they did ten years ago” (#16). It is also highlighted in these stories that “Financial prob-

lems for mothers extend to childcare” (#1, #2, #27, #28, #36), with the UK having the highest childcare bills in Europe, with only 1 in 50 UK establishments having a nursery in 1996, and most of these being either in the public sector or in major corporations (19971113-DM-Asher). The *Times* suggests that ‘the burden of childcare will only be eased if companies help out’ (19911002-TT-Cunningham). All these references to the financial problems faced by mothers and pregnant women emphasize the implications that improving (or not) maternity leave benefits might have in UK society, suggesting the need to introduce such changes.

Beyond financial problems, these stories relate that combining work with family is another challenging issue during maternity leave. This is highlighted by the many personal stories that reflect women’s own experiences. By looking at use of the term *say*, results in Antconc give 285 concordances. For example, in ‘The day I had to choose between my family and career’ (20011122-DM-Carey):

‘Jessica Spearing, 33, thought she could have the best of both worlds by working long hours every day and bringing up her family. But in September she took the radical step of resigning from her highflying job after realising her children were virtual strangers to her.’ (20011122-DM-Carey)

Sally Morris explains in the *Times* that ‘for women who do not work at home, the dilemma of when to return to work is usually determined by financial necessity and/or professional ambition’ (20000502-TT-Morris). As she explains, ‘many mothers are forced to go back early because they are the sole or main breadwinner, and the luxury of taking their full minimum entitlement [sic] of 18 weeks is impossible because they cannot exist on statutory maternity pay’. This is reinforced by medical experts, who list many reasons to stay home during the first weeks after having given birth:

‘It takes a minimum of six weeks for the organs and circulation to return to normal, which is why there is a postnatal check-up at six weeks. But it may take a lot longer for the hormonal, psychological and emotional changes to resolve themselves. Many women need much more time to adjust, and if you have a baby that needs a lot of night feeds or doesn’t sleep, the mother will suffer from sleep deprivation. But if a woman has to go back to work for financial reasons, there’s little point telling her it’s too early.’ (20000502-TT-Morris)

Finally, there is the problem of the widening gap between women belonging to different classes. The *Times* makes a point here, devoting a story to explaining some growing differences between women who enjoy maternity leave rights and those who do not. On the one hand, mothers belonging to the upper class

enjoy more maternity rights, keep their careers despite having children, and are slimmer, though they drink more. On the other hand, mothers belonging to lower classes work mainly in part-time jobs with less maternity leave rights, are less likely to keep their jobs after giving birth, and to be overweight, with average blood pressure rising in recent years:

'This confirms increasing polarisation. Women who lack advantages are likely to have more substandard employment contracts and less security. They face higher risks of poverty in old age through lack of pension cover.' (19980113-TT-Hawkes_Murray)

In a way, these findings highlight how the *Times* and *Daily Mail* paid attention to the problems of the ML benefits system as it was established during these years, particularly when they refer to the ideas that "mothers-to-be have financial issues" and that "ML policies lead to a wider economic gap between affluent and low income mothers". Even other problems which are not essentially financial, such as the difficulty of combining work and personal life, are very much determined by economic factors, according to these stories, as in the case of single mothers or families where the mother is the main breadwinner. These suggest the many economic implications, and the consequences for the class structure in Britain, of maternity leave and related issues.

4.2.2. Macroproposition 2: "Improving maternity leave policies leads mostly to negative consequences"

The second macrostructure in the discourse surrounding maternity leave and affordability in the *Times* and *Daily Mail* from 1997 to 2001, that improving maternity leave policies leads to negative consequences, is built of 7 propositions:

"If maternity leave policies are improved, women will not be hired"
 "If maternity leave policies are improved, women's prospects will be blighted"
 "If a woman is hired despite being pregnant or having a child, she will be subject to abuse"
 "If parental leave is improved, parents will turn down new rights"
 "Improving maternity leave regulations will increase class differences"
 "Negative consequences of improving maternity leave will affect mostly the job market and businesses"
 "Improving maternity leave regulations implies huge costs, which are unaffordable"

Much is said about the consequences of improving maternity leave regulations, and related issues, in the stories selected. Some of the positive effects this would have on businesses and on the newly-born babies are mentioned in both the *Times* and *Daily Mail*, namely: higher staff morale, less unplanned absence, increased likelihood that the mother will return to her job after the leave, and better conditions for the child.

These contrast with the many negative consequences that are very frequently presented in these stories, in what may be seen as an attempt to instil fear in readers. According to these stories, improvements in maternity leave policies mean that women will not be hired and that their job prospects will be blighted. As warned by the *Daily Mail*, 'The government says that around 35% of women will take advantage of this compared to only 2% of men. There is a real danger this will become another reason why firms decide not to employ women' (19990804-DM-Wilson). In the case of those women who would still be hired, it is suggested that these women would be subject to abuse by companies, as highlighted in the following statement by Ruth Lea:

'As soon as arrangements of this sort between employer and employee become regulations - as opposed to individual

agreements - who knows what abuse they will be open to? [...] Many bosses try very hard to be family-friendly but if someone takes three months off it is very disruptive to a firm. Employers in future will look for people perhaps without young children who they believe will be more reliable. [...] We already know that at least 45 per cent of bosses admit they discriminate against women of childbearing age because they fear they will take lengthy maternity leave.' (19990311-DM-Purnell)

This paragraph merits special attention, for it offers a clear, self-contradictory message regarding maternity leave policies: while Ruth Lea warns against introducing such improvements in the belief they will bring future abuse towards women of childbearing age, she states there is already real discrimination against these women. What is more, abuse is presented as a result of regulations, when it should be the case that regulations stop abuse, or at least help the government to reduce such abuse.

The negative consequences are portrayed as being parents potentially turning down their new rights to parental leave, if those rights were to come into force, partly 'because they fear it could harm their career prospects' (19990311-DM-Purnell). The *Times* and *Daily Mail* suggest that few people and no men will use unpaid leave. This is supported by the idea that 'in countries such as Germany and Sweden, where parental leave is unpaid, uptake is almost non-existent' (20000112-TT-Renshaw), and restated again when considering that 'projections indicate that, without payment, only 2% of men and 35% of women would take advantage of the offer of time off to work to take care of children' (20000422-DM-Eastham). Beyond the realm of parents, some stories indicate that the proposals to improve maternity leave regulations would increase class differences, creating 'an upper-middle class perk, rather than acting as landmark legislation' (19990805-TT-Unknown2), mainly because 'only better-off parents would be able to consider losing their earnings for 13 weeks' (20000422-DM-Eastham).

Though newspapers do discuss negative consequences for mothers and for families if maternity leave rights were to improve, there is actually much more discussion of the perceived negative consequences for the UK job market, and for business in general. For instance, it is argued that the proposals would create differences between sectors, as 'these firms [the ones that provide child-care in-house] are overwhelmingly in the public sector, or are major corporations with huge resources' (19971113-DM-Asher), and that the proposals would harm Britain's competitive edge in world markets. It is argued that there would be damaging consequences for businesses, and that these businesses (and especially small firms) would have serious financial problems. This is suggested on many different occasions, probably being the most referenced consequence in the stories selected, such as in 'Another blow for businesses' (19990804-DM-Wilson), 'If someone decides to take three months off in a small firm, you can just imagine the problems it will cause' (19990804-DM-Wilson) or 'Would any sane man want to run a small business in Blair's red tape?' (19990805-DM-Unknown2).

Problems for businesses are not just financial, according to the *Daily Mail*, where it is suggested that business planning would become more difficult. Additionally, these problems might force businesses to close. For all these reasons, Stephen Alambritis, of the Federation of Small Businesses, proposes some solutions specifically for small businesses, such as more freedom and flexibility, exceptions, and the example of America, where 'companies with under around GBP 300,000 turnover or fewer than 50 employees are allowed to disregard laws on equal pay, parental leave and disability requirements' (19990804-DM-Wilson). Probably the most striking example of the problems comes in the following extract, where a company director justified the many reasons to oppose these policy changes:

'[...] Why is this Government intent on hounding small companies like mine to destruction? [...] These excessive, unnecessary regulations are what destroy jobs and blunt Britain's competitive edge in world markets. Yesterday's announcement that all working parents will have the right to up to 13 weeks' unpaid leave during the first five years of a child's life, is yet another nail in the coffin of Britain's 3.5 million small and medium-sized businesses, which employ 13 million people. [...] It sounds like a nice idea. It sounds warm, it sounds caring, it sounds family-friendly. It is, no doubt, well-intentioned, meant to make all our lives better. What it will actually do is make most of our lives worse. It is a disastrous measure for all of us, whether we have families or not. [...] Absurd? Of course. But it is what the regulations mean.' (19990805-DM-Unknown2)

Much is said in these stories about the estimated costs of maternity leave and related issues, such as childcare, parental leave, and maternity pay. Childcare, for instance, is calculated to be £6000 a year for a family with two children, with one child at pre-school and the other child at school, requiring after-school and holiday care, to enable both parents to work. Parental leave is estimated to cost £250 million a year (19990311-DM-Purnell), and maternity pay is estimated to cost around £500 million a year (20000214-DM-Hughes). The quantification of the topic serves as a restatement that maternity leave was monetized in the right-of-centre press between 1997 and 2001, with many of these news stories containing references to such costs, and using them as an argument to turn down new rights.

The problem, though, is not that new regulations around maternity leave will incur more costs, which they obviously will, but that both the *Times* and the *Daily Mail* display two contradictory discourses in these stories: on the one hand, they recognize that mothers and families in general suffer bad conditions, which may turn in give rise to dangerous economic consequences affecting families locally, but also society and its class structure more widely; on the other, they emphasize the many negative consequences of improving maternity leave policies, and the fact that this is not affordable by employers, the government, local councils and the taxpayer, at least according to these results. The message that Britain may need improvements but, at the same time, cannot afford them, very much follows the line of neoliberal discourses and the notion of inevitability, as stated by Watt (2008): "It is the discursive appearance of inevitability that provides neoliberalism with its more potent ideological weapon in the on-going struggle for hegemony" (2008: 348).

5. Conclusions

This paper has analysed a corpus of news stories from the *Daily Mail* and the *Times* including the phrase *maternity leave*, in those years when Britain introduced the most significant policy changes concerning maternity rights. A statistical analysis of economic terms has served to determine that there was a change in the representation of maternity leave in the right-of-centre UK press, at specific times in Britain when new policies were adopted: by 1997–2001, discussion of maternity leave became more monetized in these newspapers. A subsequent contextual analysis has complemented the initial, statistical observations, by examining the usage of *afford* during the years 1997 to 2001. Concordances have been inspected and expanded in search of propositions, which have revealed two macrostructures in the discourse surrounding maternity leave in these stories: (1) mothers-to-be face many problems and (2) improving maternity leave policies leads primarily to negative consequences.

These underlying macrostructures suggest that, when referring to maternity leave between 1997 and 2001, the *Times* and *Daily Mail* may have displayed a resistance to policy changes, and used a pervasive discourse towards readers which was not used between 1971 and 1977. This kind of discourse may have contributed to the growing economic inequality in Britain, by making readers perceive improvements in maternity rights in this particular way. More specifically, women may have felt pressure not to become pregnant or, if they already were, to resign in order to make things easier for their family and their employer, even if this meant losing their financial independence. In the end, the macrostructures found in this particular discourse are contradictory because they somehow recognize the need to improve such policies, but also suggest that they are totally unaffordable. This particular view is displayed as inevitable and as common sense during these relatively recent years, placing these stories in the trend of a neoliberalist, hegemonic discourse.

The present study, as discussed, has only focussed on one of the many drivers which may affect economic inequality in society, that is: maternity leave benefits. Further studies could look at the representation of other social benefits or inequality drivers, such as social mobility or unemployment. It would be worthwhile paying further attention to the use of the term *class*. The downward trend of usage of this economic term echoes Toolan's (2016) finding in his corpus of Christopher Steven's TV reviews, that is, that it seems 'natural' not to talk about class at present in the *Daily Mail* reviews. Further studies could explore this particular issue in a wider context. It is also interesting to note that, by expanding concordances, there were more references to companies and employers than to families when discussing the unaffordability of the policy improvements. This may suggest that *The Times* and *Daily Mail* are not interested in whether it is affordable for a woman or a family to have a baby in the UK; nonetheless, these are preliminary findings that would be complemented by a full-length study of, for instance, social actors and other theoretical frameworks, namely those of transitivity or of textual oppositions.

Appendix A . Instances of *afford* in news stories between 1971 and 1977 (in graphological context)

1. The State **affords** special protection to mothers and children through maternity leave, shortened working hours for mother of large families, expanded maternity hospitals, nurseries and kindergartens and other measures.

Appendix B . Instances of *afford* in news stories between 1997 and 2001 (in graphological context)

1. She says: 'You can pay up to \$2.50 an hour for a childminder. I couldn't **afford** that.'
2. On the other side of the divide are less-educated and less-qualified women, many in part-time work, who are less likely to keep their jobs after becoming mothers, and are less able to **afford** childcare.
3. The Blair Government, for all that it was carried in on the shoulders of the approving middle classes, cannot **afford** now to heed middle-class anxiety.
4. However, dismissal of a woman during pregnancy could not be based on her inability, as a result of her condition, to perform her contractual duties, as if such an interpretation were adopted, the protection **afforded** by Community law to a woman during pregnancy would be available only to pregnant women who were able to comply with the conditions of their employment contracts, with the result that Directive 76/207 would be rendered ineffective.

5. Accordingly, the principle of non-discrimination required that, throughout the period of pregnancy, a woman be **afforded** protection similar to that to which she was held entitled in Hertz.
6. It's a good idea to save up as much as you can **afford**, enough to live on for six months, and to reclaim the gross interest if you are not paying tax.
7. What was the extent of the protection **afforded** to women as regards pregnancy and maternity deriving from the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and the Equal Treatment Directive 76/207/EEC (OJ 1976 No L39/40)?
8. People on low incomes cannot **afford** to take long, unpaid leave.
9. Many people feared their 'boss would not like it' if they exercised their new rights to be away so long, and a third said they could not **afford** to.
10. Others either cannot **afford** to take unpaid time off or are scared that their boss will hold it against them.
11. Small business leaders last night demanded a cast-iron guarantee that the leave would remain unpaid. This was sparked by calls from some senior Labour figures for financial help for low-paid employees who could not **afford** to take advantage of the plan.
12. First, in October last year, came the EU working time directive to limit working hours to 48 h a week. It also increased the minimum paid annual leave to four weeks from November this year. It was similarly well-intentioned but its anomalies cost people jobs they could not **afford** to lose.
13. Another well-meant idea but one which many employers simply could not **afford** to pay.
14. Trades unions, and other interested lobbies, while welcoming the present plan in principle, are already protesting that it will be of little value to those who might be thought to need it most if they cannot **afford** to accept it.
15. So regardless of which side of the Atlantic you are on, it might be a good idea to get some financial planning advice from your accountant before starting a family. You run the risk being told that, on paper, you simply cannot **afford** it; but we all know there are times when we have to ignore our accountants.
16. When I looked into the maternity package, it started to dawn on me that I couldn't **afford** to take any time off at all.
17. I feel privileged that I can **afford** to stay at home and look after them for this comparatively short time in their lives when they need me.
18. There was a time when all mothers stayed at home, then there was a different convention that you had to work because that was the politically correct thing to do. Now more are becoming full-time mothers: because they can **afford** it, and because they choose to.
19. But anyone who is not super-salaried will have to plan well ahead to **afford** the extra time off work.
20. Obviously, the earlier you invest a lump sum, the better your prospects of **affording** leave will be.
21. 'Many women want to take more time with their babies but cannot **afford** to because statutory maternity pay is too low,' Miss Harman said yesterday.
22. Mrs Lea said companies, especially small ones, could not **afford** a key worker to be absent for up to three months.
23. I just could not **afford** the luxury of maternity leave.
24. But that does not mean they wouldn't like to: a recent survey by Mother & Baby magazine showed that 81% of mothers would like to stay at home with their small children if they could **afford** it.
25. "Unfortunately, it tends to be professional women in high-profile positions who return to work most quickly, mainly because they can **afford** the sort of high-quality, expensive child care needed, but also because they may have more control over their careers and can be flexible about when and how they work".
26. 'At that time she wanted to spend longer with her children than she could **afford** to'.
27. 'I could not **afford** the GBP 8000 a year to put Tom in a nursery and I was financially badly off'.
28. With three young children to care for, I don't have time to think about resuming my career and I couldn't **afford** child-care anyway'.
29. With a GBP 300 a-month mortgage to meet, a GBP 120 car loan and another GBP 100 loan to pay, I can't **afford** to be off work for too long. We've been used to living on a combined salary of GBP 25,000, so we would struggle on Darren's salary alone'.
30. The result, says Joanna Wade, legal officer at the Maternity Alliance, is that women are often forced to return to work early because they cannot **afford** to stay at home - a decision that can have serious repercussions for the bonding between mother and child.
31. Many women would love to stay at home with their children but can't **afford** to.
32. We did our sums and worked out we could just about manage. But I couldn't **afford** to give up work altogether, so I am setting up a freelance business which I can run from home.
33. Treasury officials said the boost meant that many mothers who had been unable to find a job that paid enough to cover the costs of childcare would now be able to **afford** to work.
34. More than three quarters of women say they do not take longer, unpaid leave because they cannot **afford** to.
35. If they work, much of their childcare costs will be paid by the State; if they want to stay at home they are more likely to be able to **afford** to, since their partner's income has been boosted.
36. 'I'm also very lucky that I can **afford** to have the child care that makes me feel secure about being able to walk out of the door'.
37. We could **afford** for me to stop if we cut back a little on luxuries.

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