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## **CLOSE YOUR EYES AND THINK OF ENGLAND**

### ***Pronatalism in the British Print Media***

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*Faced with declining fertility rates, media in Britain are reacting with anxiety about cultural annihilation. To look at how nationalism inflects concerns over biological and cultural reproduction, the authors analyze coverage of falling fertility and rising immigration in Great Britain in major newspapers in 2000–2. They find pronatalist appeals to be common and especially directed at women but varying in how women's duty to the nation is framed. Appeals characterized as begging, lecturing, threatening, and bribing express different relationships between individual interest and the national good and offer positive and negative views of women. The political leanings of specific newspapers affect how they connect biological reproduction to the cultural threat seen in immigration. Even positive views of women as making rational reproductive choices are tainted by alarmist views of immigration as a threat to national survival.*

**Keywords:** *pronatalism; fertility; reproduction; immigration; nationalism; Great Britain; media; feminism; discourse*

**F**eminism and pronatalism have a politically ambivalent relationship. On one hand, feminism encourages separating motherhood from personhood. Critiques of the social pressures on women to bear and rear children are part of the feminist claim for a wider range of options in women's lives (Hollingsworth 1916; Meyers 2001). On the other hand, feminist challenges to the devaluation of everything identified with womanhood and support for the women struggling to raise children in difficult conditions define promotherhood social policies as *prowoman* (Brush 2002). When and how pronatalism is good for women remains an open question, and the answer may depend on the particular form that concerns about population and fertility take.

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Pronatalism and nationalism are more strongly linked. In nationalist discourses, the nation's strength and authenticity are tied to the biological and cultural reproduction of its people (Yuval-Davis 1997). This makes women's roles as reproducers central to nationalist projects. Since national reproduction needs women, nationalism always has feminist or antifeminist implications in how it formulates its reproductive politics. Coercive forms of pronatalism accompany not only political authoritarianism (Kligman 1998) but also class and cultural struggles for political domination. Studies of pronatalist politics in "settler societies" such as the United States, Australia, and Israel show how such policies can be explicitly racist (Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis 1995). In the United States, coercive control over reproduction, such as legal limitations on abortion, is part of a cultural struggle against equal recognition of diverse family forms and racial/ethnic groups (Collins 1999). Thus, understanding the gender politics of pronatalism implies addressing the race and class context in which these struggles take place.

Yet, if analysis is limited to cases where pronatalism is part of government policies that are authoritarian, coercive, or explicitly racist, then the answer to the question of whether pronatalism can be good for women is automatically no. But pronatalist nationalist projects can also be part of democratic discourses about reproduction. Swedish nationalist discourse about the "people's home" was associated with greater support for women as both mothers and workers (Hobson 2003) and French "republicanism" defined motherhood as a contribution to the nation deserving of policy support (Cova 1991; King 1998; Misra 1998). Because the ways political cultures recognize motherhood lead to different types of policy outcomes, how population issues are framed in relation to women matters. Media use of demographic facts to steer social policy is familiar when the issue is overpopulation. By arousing public concern and mobilizing nongovernmental organization (NGO) responses, the "population bomb" discourse of the 1970s led to dramatic social interventions to reduce global population growth (Correa 1994; Greenhalgh 1995). Although some of these policies were coercive, many scholars conclude that framing women's rights as having a negative effect on birthrates encouraged decision makers to emphasize women's education and empowerment in the global South (Berkovich 1999; Chatterjee and Riley 2001; Purakayastha et al. 2003). But the belief that expanding women's rights and decreasing population size are correlated can be troubling to policy makers in a context where population is already low and falling, as in Western Europe today.

In this article, we examine how British newspapers frame the issue of a falling national birthrate as a social problem. Defining the nation itself as at risk from a failure to reproduce, media discourse also offers diverse diagnoses of what is wrong with women, and to a lesser extent with society at large. Our title, and guiding metaphor, is drawn from the supposed advice for women of the Victorian era to endure sex for the sake of the national good, to "close your eyes and think of England." While this saying today appears an outmoded joke, it illustrates the central role that women's reproduction has long played in British nationalist projects.

In the first section, we identify four framings of this connection, each having a different view of women and their relation to the nation. In the second section, we relate these four frames to their class and race context by examining the party leanings and attitudes toward immigration of the British newspapers favoring particular frames. We conclude that even when feminist language is used and potentially feminist policies discussed, the nationalism and racism in such appeals should make feminists cautious about embracing pronatalism as a strategy for achieving women's rights.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

British newspapers, both the mainstream broadsheets and the flashier tabloids, have paid significant attention to the nation's falling birthrate in the past several years. The United Kingdom's birthrate is projected to fall to about 1.61 by 2005, a figure well below the 2.1 births per women needed to maintain the population at its current size (U.N. Population Division 2001). This drop has consequences that "realist" models of media as simply holding a mirror to society would stress (McQuail 1994). For these models, the effects of low fertility—overall population decline, future labor shortages, and budget deficits as the proportion of active workers to pensioners shrinks—are "real" macroeconomic problems that responsible news makers should present as public issues.

But most scholars of media emphasize that media attention is not distributed according to the actual severity of a social problem, either in its prevalence or impact (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988; Stone 1988). Whether recognizing violence such as sexual harassment or hate crimes (Jenness and Grattet 2001; Saguy 2003), constructing social risk from diseases like AIDS (Epstein 1996), or assessing the importance of social trends such as changes in family types (Misra, Moller, and Karides 2003), media concern reflects wider social conflicts and interests. The policies at stake and what groups mobilize to advance and resist them form part of the struggle to which media coverage responds (Gitlin 1980; Stone 1988). Moreover, the data generated by scientists and used in the media to frame social problems are not pure information but reflect agendas in and outside of academia (Best 1989). Social science data may have an impact on which issues attract media concern, but media speakers are able to select from among competing facts those that fit their preferred issue focus and framing (Stone 1988). Therefore, to say that a social problem is constructed through active media work is not to deny a material basis for concern but to focus on how those concerns are framed for a particular audience and the implications that this framing has for the political solutions seen as feasible or desirable (Cook 1998; Ferree et al. 2002).

Such media work especially comes in critical discourse moments when heightened attention to an issue provides opportunities for speakers with various interests to attempt to define its meaning (Gamson and Mogdigliani 1989). In such periods, the nature of what everyone knows becomes widely established and remains part of

the common store of understanding even after media attention moves on to other issues. Thus, for example, the crack epidemic was a critical discourse moment for establishing the framing of crack babies as a problem of African American mothers' irresponsibility, which persisted even after maternal addiction was no longer treated as news (Litt and McNeil 1997; Springer 2003).

The release of the February 28, 2001 UN report on population decline and the March 21, 2000 UN report on replacement migration converted a long-standing trend into a critical discourse moment (UN Population Division 2000, 2001). The nature and tone of the media coverage strongly implied this was not a typical policy problem. In the words of the *Sunday Times* (2000c) (London), what does it mean when a nation "wakes up one morning and faces the nightmare scenario of finding it cannot reproduce itself?"

Our question is why and how British media (journalists, commentators, and the press organs that employ them) define the transition to low fertility as a matter freighted with nationalist anxiety. This analysis draws attention to their evaluation of the reproductive choices of white native-born women, relating it to the anxieties provoked by immigration and showing how race, class, and gender concerns about the future population of Britain are expressed in pronatalist stories.

Pronatalism is defined here as a political, ideological, or religious project to encourage childbearing by some or all members of a civil, ethnic, or national group. While state-sponsored projects to boost natality are some of the most extensively studied forms of pronatalism (Bock 1991; Kligman 1998), civil society's groups, organizations, or institutions are likely to be the leaders of pronatalist ideological projects in nations with strong liberal traditions. Insofar as their cultural claims are successful, procreation becomes a patriotic, religious, or eugenic obligation, and motherhood is constructed as the central feature of female identity (Heitlinger 1991; Yuval-Davis 1997).

Pronatalist ideologies may be adopted for different reasons. Social movements or political factions often incorporate pronatalism in their attempts to gain or maintain power, since some pronatalist discourses grant the speaker political or moral legitimacy by association with concepts like tradition, family, or national strength and purity (Gal 1994; Yuval-Davis 1997). Cultural elites may be interested in pronatalist discourses as ideological signifiers in other more unspoken conflicts, such as renegotiation of the power relationship between states and citizens (Gal 1994; Gal and Kligman 2000). Constructing reproduction and sexuality as their appropriate concern can legitimate the extension of their power not just into the private sphere of the home but over individual bodies (Bordo 1993; Foucault 1978). Moreover, discourses about reproduction, both as biological fertility and the work of passing on the nation's language, culture, beliefs, and norms through child rearing, are central to affirming group identities (Gal and Kligman 2000; Yuval-Davis 1997). Arguments about who is entitled to reproduce the group and how that is to be done express conflict over what the authentic group is, who can claim membership, and what its future will be.

Population decline in Europe is an occasion for such debates. Krause (2001) analyzes scholarly writing on fertility declines in Italy and notes that, far from being impartial, these texts contain highly politicized messages about the reproductive choices of Italian women. Within a few decades, demographic writing shifted from hailing women with small families as rational, responsible procreators (in comparison to their “backward” high-fertility counterparts) to presenting low-fertility women as irrational, self-destructive, and immoral. This, she argues, is a reflection of anxieties about wide-scale changes in Italy, including the erosion of patriarchal power, the reorganization of class structures, and ethnic changes due to immigration. A recent analysis of German newspaper and magazine coverage of fertility indicates that declining birthrates were framed as a threat, not only to the economy but to the stability of the family and the strength of the nation (Stark and Kohler 2002.)

### PRONATALISM AND THE PRESS IN BRITAIN

Several factors make Britain an interesting case. Political liberalism emphasizes both individual independence and reliance on the market for provision of social goods (O'Connor, Orloff, and Shaver 1999). As a liberal state, the United Kingdom has long been more reluctant than other European nations to enact pronatalist policies, including those that support mothers, families, and child-rearing labor (Gauthier 1993; Koven and Michel 1990; Siim 2000). Britain is distinctive in Western Europe for being a modern and relatively wealthy state that nonetheless offers a sparse collection of family benefits.

Moreover, while the interests of the state in its pension system and long-term labor supply may be served by an increase in native-born British natality, the state itself cannot be said to be initiating or controlling the pronatalist project in the media. British newspapers are independent of state control, diverse in their political orientation, responsive to a wide range of organizations and interests in civil society, and have economic and cultural interests of their own. Pronatalism in the media is thus a complex and multifaceted project advanced by multiple actors, situated within multiple institutions possibly working at cross-purposes to one another, since most British newspapers are explicitly placed on the Left or Right (McDowall 1999). These political leanings are not specific to any one of the interests that combine in making a newspaper. Journalists, readers, sources, and advertisers are selected and select themselves to fit with its overall tenor. The long-standing confluence of these civil society actors into identifiable streams gives each newspaper its distinctive character and makes it a cultural actor that can reliably be read as having a particular type of voice and audience. We analyze the newspapers' pronatalist discourses as indicators of varying cultural ideas about normative reproductive behavior, women and their relationship to the national interest, and what immigration and the birthrate together imply for the future of Britain.

## METHOD

We examined expressed concerns about low fertility in British news articles published between January 1, 2000 and May 15, 2002. The time parameter for the sample was given by the release of the UN Population Division reports on low fertility and on replacement migration as a potential solution (2/28/2000 and 3/21/2000). These releases created a critical discourse moment. Comparing the release period to the 30-month period ending May 15, 1999, the dramatic increase in attention is apparent. The smallest increase in coverage was from 15 to 33 stories (*The Independent*), the largest, from 4 to 41 articles (*The Times*). Since frames rather than changes in level of attention are our focus, choosing a critical discourse moment rather than a longer time frame is advantageous. A wide variety of speakers are then engaged in explicit debate about the meaning of an issue that will have an enduring effect on public consciousness, while a small scatter of stories in a longer period may never achieve widespread public notice (Gamson and Modigliani 1989).

The sampling frame was 10 major British newspapers covering a range of ideological orientations and including both broadsheet newspapers and sensationalistic but widely circulated tabloids (see appendix). To identify relevant articles, the LexisNexis full-text database was searched using the terms *birthrate*, *demographic*, or *population* (in full text) and *baby* or *birth* in the title. After duplicate and irrelevant articles were discarded, the sample contained 202 articles focused on declining fertility.

The definition of the sample did not presuppose that the decline in fertility described in the UN reports (2000, 2001) would be framed as a social problem, since media could take the opportunity to attack the findings of the report rather than affirm and even magnify them. In fact, only a few articles ( $n = 7$ ) frame the decline in positive terms, and another handful ( $n = 9$ ) argue that there is no fertility crisis at all. It is important to note that fertility declines in less industrialized nations are almost always framed positively.

We coded articles for their overall presentation of low fertility as a social problem or crisis, and for the presence of a pronatalist message. This was defined as presenting increased childbearing as either normative for individual Britons or essential to the good of the nation. Analysis of these pronatalist appeals focused on defining the differences and similarities among their messages, generating the typology below.

Articles that explicitly advocated solutions were coded for the types of social policies they supported. Finally, articles were also coded in terms of their attention to, and framing of, immigration as a population issue (whether it was positive, conditionally acceptable, neutral, or negative) and how population changes due to immigration were interpreted in relation to changes in natality (as part of the problem or part of the solution or both). References to immigrants, asylum seekers, and nonwhite populations in Britain were examined in these articles and in a comparison sample of articles independently selected to provide an overview of media

discourse on migration and racial change in Britain. Using this independent sample ( $N = 100$ ) of racial population discourse, newspapers were characterized as more or less favorable to immigration, and the types of pronatalism expressed in newspapers with differing stances to immigration were compared. This allowed us to place the discourse about native-born population decline into a wider framework of media concerns about racialized population change.

## RESULTS

Most of the coverage of the declining birthrate in the United Kingdom and Europe presents this demographic falloff as a serious social problem (140 articles) and uses a language of acute crisis in 91 of these. These pieces weave together themes of aging with disappearance or death ( $n = 43$ ), and many are highly emotional in tone. “Spin the clock forward 30 years and Britain will look like Hamelin after the Pied Piper—a place of sterility in which the revellers have turned into lonely old people,” argues a writer in the January 3, 2002 *Daily Mail*. Three articles from the *Times* (December 10, 2000; February 10, 2002; March 22, 2002) argue that low-fertility countries are committing “cultural suicide” or “national suicide,” and the *Financial Times* (2001), in a piece titled “Why We Must Go Forth and Multiply,” laments that “western Europe” is “turning itself into a geriatric ward.”

A subset of the 140 articles presenting fertility declines as a social problem are the 48 (24 percent of all articles) that define low fertility wholly or partly as a threat to the United Kingdom’s cultural and ethnic landscape. This is not entirely surprising. According to UN fertility models, in order to insulate itself from the projected economic consequences of low fertility, the United Kingdom would have to increase immigration. For instance, to maintain the dependency ratio at present levels (4.1 active workers for each individual drawing state support) through 2050, the United Kingdom might have to admit as many as 1 million individuals annually or increase the retirement age to 72 (UN Population Division 2000, 2001).

These articles connect maintaining Britain’s cultural identity with biological reproduction. A *Times* piece (November 15, 2001) warns that populations can only adopt replacement migration as a solution to low fertility “at the risk of a loss of their original identity.” Likewise, a writer for the *Daily Telegraph* asks, “If immigrants substitute for births, will British society as we know it disappear?” (August 7, 2001). The *Independent*, a left-wing paper, carried a similar warning, noting that immigration levels high enough to slow population ageing would only “generate rapid population growth and eventually displace the original population from its majority position” (October 26, 2001).

In all, 94 articles in the sample (46 percent) discuss both immigration and the declining birthrate, but not all of them present it so negatively. In fact, the vast majority of these 94 articles (82 percent) present immigration as either positive (40, or 42 percent), neutral (16 percent), or conditionally acceptable (24 percent). Although those we place in the “conditionally acceptable” category define

immigration as necessary in light of declining fertility, they also claim that admitted immigrants will only be welcome if they assimilate to British norms, values, and customs, and/or they predict that increased immigration, while necessary, will result in spikes in the crime rate, increases in unemployment, or a souring of race relations in the United Kingdom.

It should not be surprising, then, that 81 articles (40 percent of the total) suggest that the preferred solution to low fertility is a decision by native-born Britons to return to the larger family sizes of the past. Although they share certain assumptions about reproduction and the nation, these pronatalist articles vary in how they diagnose the reasons for fertility decline and what policy responses they define as appropriate.

Consistent with the common assumption that reproductive work is a female duty, most pronatalist messages were aimed at women. Thirty-eight of the 81 pronatalist articles (47 percent) solely addressed a stated or implied female subject, while a further 25 articles (31 percent) addressed their message primarily to women but also contained ambiguous messages that might apply to men or to gender-neutral "Britons" or "married couples." Seventeen articles (21 percent) addressed gender-neutral subjects with no focus on women or men. Only 1 article focused solely on men. Since none of these articles presented the ideal procreation scenario as anything other than a heterosexual, two-parent family, it is striking that so few address men as reproducers.

The pronatalist rhetoric in this sample divides into four categories based on its framing of women and women's reproductive work. Articles specifically "beg," "lecture," "threaten," and/or "bribe" women to reproduce the nation (many articles contain multiple themes). Begging frames overtly state the national need for an increase in fertility and use positive language to emphasize the rewards of having children. Articles placed in the lecturing and threatening categories employ negative messages, with lecturing discourses focused on individual *causes*—presenting childless women and men as immoral, selfish, lazy, or sick—and threatening discourses dwelling on the unpleasant *consequences* of not having children. Finally, bribing articles use positive language (as begging ones do); explore social or institutional reasons for declining fertility (rather than individual or attitudinal ones, as in lecturing messages); and discuss potential changes in government, workplace, or family structures that might ameliorate the problem. Individual articles can contain more than one kind of frame, and many do. Each type of pronatalist argument offers its own distinctive understanding of the relationship of women to the nationalist project of reproduction and thus offers different potential for including feminist concerns, so we turn now to examine each one in detail.

### **Begging**

This pronatalist framing is an overt, positive call for increases in childbearing. Twenty-two articles (27 percent) of the 81 in the pronatalist subgroup contain

begging messages. An article from the *Daily Star* entitled “Give Us More Babies” (April 9, 2002) and that begins “Euro chiefs yesterday urged couples to have more babies to counter an alarming rise in the proportion of old people” is a straightforward example of this frame. Begging articles state outright that couples (7) or women (15) should have more children. The negative framing of a population in crisis is connected to a positively framed appeal to rise to the occasion and have children for the nation.

Half of the begging articles (11 out of 22) stress the individual joys of procreation. For instance, a *Daily Mail* article (January 3, 2002) notes that childless people “cannot see the wonderful way children upend material values” and continues, “Nothing in life can match the feeling of pride in your children. To the childless, the boy in the donkey costume in the primary school nativity play is just that. To you, heart in mouth, eyes brimming, he is your little boy about to make his solo singing debut. They cannot see the art in the birthday card which features a stick of pasta and a withered primrose, but to you it’s worth all the Monets in the world.” The article concludes, “Love, like happiness, is a gift that runs in families.”

Other expressions of the joy of procreation highlight the benefits of child rearing compared to other forms of status-driven consumption. An article from the *Times* (July 26, 2000) claims, “The successful conception of a child—the old fashioned way in an ongoing relationship—isn’t just something to shout about, it’s something that you wear as proudly as last year’s pashmina or this year’s Prada bowling bag. . . . The youth promoting properties of a babe in arms are—as Sharon Stone has illustrated—infinitely more effective than the most expensive jar of antiwrinkle cream or any amount of silicone injections.” This message, implicitly targeted at middle-class women, encourages childbearing by arguing that having children makes one look younger and more fashionable. The assumed subject is also reminded that children are a boon to the nation, but babies are simultaneously framed as a blessing to the woman, whether as the fulfillment of maternal love or as fashion accessories.

### Lecturing

Fifty-two articles (64 percent) contain messages in the lecturing category (45 of these 52 primarily address a female subject). This frame assumes that the childless have a duty to reproduce that they are failing to perform for some individual reason, typically diagnosed as selfishness, irresponsibility, or psychological dysfunction. In an article headlined “Sorry, baby, but our lifestyle comes first” (May 27, 2001) the *Sunday Times* argues that the low birthrate occurs because “our age is preoccupied solely with the goal of individual self-fulfillment.” The *Financial Times* takes up the same complaint in the article “Why We Must Go Forth and Multiply” (January 13, 2001). “Many trendy types regard children as a nuisance,” the author writes. “They interfere with careers, tax the bank balance and threaten a hedonistic lifestyle.” The *Daily Mail* (January 3, 2002) similarly asked, “Why ARE we too selfish

to have children?" and blamed feminism for the falling birthrate. "All around is the siren voice of the feminist argument: Marriage, traditionally the Holy Grail of womanhood, is legalized prostitution. Self-fulfillment lies less in being a wife and mother than in independence and a job which delivers a fat pay packet."

In this category, not all women who choose not to bear children are presented as selfish—one writer implies that they are mentally ill. The *Sunday Times* (January 27, 2002) identified "tokophobia" as the "profound fear of childbirth" and put the number of sufferers at "one in seven women." Quoting Kristina Hofberg, Britain's "leading expert on the syndrome," tokophobics are "often career women who can't understand how they can hold down a really good job when they can't do something as simple as have a baby."

Begging and lecturing messages both assume people make decisions about reproduction based on superficial criteria and that reproducers fail to understand their own interests correctly. But whereas begging messages assume that readers could be motivated to have children by appeals to pleasure, fashion, or sentiment, lecturing messages provide the flip side of this argument. Here it is an excessive love of pleasure, career advancement, material goods, and in some cases, self-determination, that makes people, especially women, reluctant to have children. In both cases a better understanding of self-interest would align women's reproductive choices with the nation's need for more babies.

Both begging and lecturing messages imply that the desire to have children is not inherent, natural, or uncontrollable. In this regard, both define women as self-directed reproducers. Although begging frames take a positive tone by highlighting the benefits of making good choices, while lecturing frames focus on bad choices and the negative attributes of the women making them, both imply that women make unfettered choices about reproduction. By contrast, the other two types of pronatalist messages assert—with negative or positive language—that women have an essential or natural drive to have children.

### Threatening

Threatening messages, present in 45 (56 percent) of the pronatalist articles, are typified by their use of scare tactics. Reproduction is framed as natural and essential; failing to reproduce is presented as threatening both individual well-being and social stability. Thirty-eight out of 45 threatening articles are aimed at women. Among threatening discourses that focus on individual risks from childlessness, a common subcategory (15 out of 45) features accounts of women who left child-bearing too late and are now sterile. This frame assumes that all women naturally want to have children, and the failure to do so presents a personal crisis as well as a national one.

The *Daily Telegraph* (June 30, 2001) quotes "Catherine," a 38-year-old woman who always wanted a big family but found she'd waited "too long." After "tests and

more tests," she and her husband discovered they could not conceive naturally. (The article does not specify why. The reader is left to assume that Catherine, who would have been about 33 or 34 when she had problems conceiving, was simply too old.) This necessitated a "grueling round of investigations and treatments" after which she became pregnant. "I remember making a pact with God," the grateful mother is quoted, "and saying, please let me have one child and I'll always count my blessings. I'll be content with one."

Other articles warn that women run a high risk of never finding a partner should they refuse to settle down soon (6 out of 45). The *Daily Mail* (January 15, 2001) ran a piece entitled "SINGLES: Why women are leaving it too late to find a man. How most believe they will discover Mr. Perfect. They prefer loneliness to a bad relationship. Why one in four might never become a mother." An *Evening Standard* article (December 31, 2001) sent a similar message, ending with a quote from conservative pundit Robert Whelan who warned, "The twin results of modern morality are sterility and loneliness. Sexual revolution has not meant that people are having lots of relationships but that millions are not having relationships at all. And those that are having relationships are not having families" (p. 5). The *Sunday Times* (July 9, 2000) takes the threatening rhetoric a step farther in an article entitled "Women Pay for Equality with Rise in Cancer." Other articles argue that low fertility is not only personally but socially detrimental (17 out of 45). The *Daily Telegraph* warns that a society populated by increasing numbers of only children might become "a society of people who don't know much about cooperation and turn-taking" (June 30, 2001). The *Telegraph* (April 19, 2001) quotes sociologist Frank Furedi as finding the only-child boom particularly worrying. "I look to Japan for heightened versions of British trends," he says. "There, because of a falling birthrate, they have ended up with indulgent parents and slobbish children, in a state of perpetually delayed adolescence, who regard adults as their servants" (p. 4).

The *Sunday Times* focuses on macrosocial threats: "The nightmare scenario of the human race waking up one morning and realizing it cannot reproduce itself is not just scare mongering . . . if we carry on like this, it will be a reality" (January 16, 2000). On May 27, 2001 the *Sunday Times* again argues that falling family sizes are a "psychological, moral, and spiritual shift whose causes may be economic and social but whose effects strike at the heart of civilisation." It also ran an alarmist article entitled "Breed or Die Out" (*Times*, November 15, 2001) and one warning that the low birthrate is leading humanity toward the "lightly disguised gates of hell" (*Sunday Times*, March 27, 2001).

These threat frames, unlike begging and lecturing ones, take women's duty to reproduce for granted. They raise an alarm about the failure to reproduce as a personal and social crisis. While the lecturing frame is often more directly disparaging of women, framing their bad values and choices as the cause of the crisis, the threatening frame positions women as unwittingly bringing disaster to themselves and society. The media presents itself as offering "facts" that an unknowing readership

has neglected to face, so threatening articles draw heavily on social science experts and data to legitimate the presentation of dire personal and social consequences.

### **Bribing**

Finally, 37 articles (46 percent) contain “bribing” messages. These claims rest on the assumption that the desire to have children is natural or essential to womanhood (28 of 37 bribing articles are aimed specifically at women). Assuming women want to have children, the problem this frame faces is to explain why they are not doing so. The answer is the existence of structural barriers that prevent women from following their natural inclinations. Thus, women are framed as good and government or society as deficient. The source of the problem is the lack of adequate social support for children and child rearing. Rather than the lazy, selfish, or irrational procreators presented elsewhere, women in the bribing frame are depicted positively as victims of a society that does not properly value motherhood. Both in the demand for social support and the positive view of women, this frame is most congruent with feminist analyses.

The barriers to women’s childbearing that this frame identifies are difficulties combining work and family, lack of financial resources, and insufficient support from men. Thirty-two of these 37 bribing articles argue that promoter structural changes must be made in the workplace, the state welfare system, and even relationships within individual homes to accommodate women in their desires to form families. Not only in diagnosis but in policy responses, the bribing frame is actively prowoman.

It is also the only one of the four frames to engage, albeit indirectly, with the issue of class inequality. This dearth of discussion of class-based barriers to family formation is not, perhaps, out of character for a liberal welfare state like Great Britain, in which policy favors market-based, means-tested forms of social support. Nevertheless, in contrast to the other pronatalist frames, which assume women withhold childbearing labor for superficial reasons, the bribing frame assumes that a growing number of Britons are making a rational choice not to have children because of real economic constraints that British employers and government need to address. Not only class, but even more explicitly, gender disadvantage is framed as the source of the fertility problem.

For instance, the *Daily Telegraph* (August 7, 2001) warns that the birthrate is falling fastest in societies where women are burdened with “traditional male attitudes, weak family welfare and inflexible work arrangements,” while in nations where “families are supported, where women can combine work and family, and where men (sometimes) wear the aprons, as in Scandinavia and France, birth rates are higher.” Likewise, in the *Sunday Mirror*’s “Happiness Is an Early Baby and a Nice Boss” (February 17, 2002), the author argues that “modern life isn’t good for marriage and having children” since most employers are not willing to help women juggle the demands of career and care work.

TABLE 1: Dimensions of Pronatalist Discourse

	<i>Women's Interests in Conflict with National Good</i>	<i>Women's Interests Congruent with National Good</i>
Positive tone toward women	Bribing	Begging
Negative tone toward women	Lecturing	Threatening

### Comparing the Frames

Overall, the four frames position women differently in relation to their own interests and those of the nation. Contrary to our expectation, the issues of choice, consciousness, and duty are not arranged along a single dimension from most-to-least feminist or nationalist.

Both the begging and threatening discourses stress consequences that they frame as being overlooked by women—either the rewards of childbearing or the dangers of deciding not to do so. In both cases the rewards or dangers are framed as falling on women and the nation together. Individual and social costs and benefits are taken as congruent: The national good is something that will flow from women and families following their own true self-interest.

By contrast, both the bribing and the lecturing discourses see women as making choices that are driven by their own needs first, with society taking second place. The bribing frame sees the choice as rational, but one that social policy can address by changing the rewards and costs; the lecturing frame strongly suggests that this order of priorities is immoral or even deranged. The separation between the individual and the social system highlights the potential for a conflict of interest between them. The pronatalist framing of the resolution of such conflict is to try to remedy the women's or the policy makers' choices to make them prioritize the nation's need for children. This suggests that these are not really less nationalist than begging or threatening frames, but that they naturalize nationalism less, presenting it as a political and social choice. Their moral implication is that liberal individualism and self-interest are inadequate as a basis for social survival, let alone prosperity and happiness. Cultural and political authorities, knowing what is needed, must provide instruction (lecture) or incentives (bribe) to get citizens to reproduce.

The four frames (Table 1) also differ in another cross-cutting dimension. Both begging and bribing frames offer positive images of women, with the begging frames stressing women's power and bribing frames stressing women's victimization. As an approach to social policy, the begging frame assumes women only need to be persuaded to see the rewards that exist; the bribing frame assumes that women already know the value of having children and that society has to reduce its costs. Both lecturing and threatening frames, by contrast, offer negative views of women.

The threatening frame implies women are unwittingly a source of danger to society and to themselves. Insofar as the lecturing frame is defined by its attention to causes rather than the consequences, it imputes more agency to women and is simultaneously more hostile to them and their choices.

Because both the lecturing and threatening frames express negative views of women, they seem more likely to be related to negative views of other social groups. However, in these newspapers, they are not the discourses most related to exclusionary definitions of the British nation or seeing immigration as a threat. In the next section, we examine this surprising result.

### IMMIGRATION, NATIONALISM, AND PRONATALIST POLITICS

Overall, left-leaning newspapers were less likely than the conservative ones to carry pronatalist arguments. While 50 percent of the right-wing news articles in this sample had some kind of pronatalist frame, only 29 percent of left-wing articles did. Furthermore, the negative frames of lecturing and threatening were more common in the right-leaning press: Forty-two percent of pieces in the conservative papers carried lecturing frames, threatening frames, or both, whereas 18 percent of pieces in the left-wing papers did so.

Surprisingly, articles that advocate changing government benefit structures, workplaces, and families to support mothers also appear more often in the conservative than in the liberal press. Nineteen percent of all articles in conservative papers contain one or more of these “pro-mother” arguments, while only 11 percent of those in liberal papers do so.

Conservatives’ interest in bribing women to have babies seems to be related to the liberal papers’ greater willingness to define immigration as an alternative solution. Although liberal papers are equally likely to express dismay about declines in the birthrate, they are more likely to name immigration and immigrants as a way of addressing this concern. Of the 34 articles in left-leaning papers that talk about immigration in addition to discussing the birthrate, 59 percent present increased immigration as a positive or neutral step in light of declining fertility, whereas among the 50 conservative articles that discuss both, only 20 percent present increased immigration as positive or neutral. When conservative papers present immigration as a necessary step, they are more likely to condition their acceptance of immigrants on their assimilation or warn of social problems (36 percent in these papers compared with 15 percent of articles in liberal ones).

Insofar as conservative writers reject immigration as a means of addressing the population problem, they are more likely to turn to bribing women to do so. An article in the *Times* entitled “Immigration Will Not Ease Our Burden” (June 22, 2000) argues, “The root cause of population ageing is a very low birthrate. An effective response must make the workplace, the tax and welfare system and gender relations as a whole more favorable to women, so they can fulfill ambitions to have more than

one child. Look after women, and the population will look after itself.” *The Mail on Sunday* made a similar argument in an article on immigration reform that ended with the phrase “If we look after women’s interests, our population will look after itself” (February 25, 2001), and the *Daily Telegraph* adopted the same message in a piece titled “Look After Mothers and the Birthrate Will Stop Dwindling” (August 7, 2001).

The conservative papers sound feminist in their support for child care and ending discrimination against women. Likewise, their stated support for economic restructuring and redistribution projects seems out of character. Changes that would further women’s interests, according to these pieces, are the provision of more and better day care facilities (*Daily Mail* July 2, 2001); increased flexibility in the workplace (*Daily Telegraph* June 30, 2001); and the extension of more government benefits to women, particularly poor and single mothers (*Daily Telegraph* March 15, 2000; *Times* June 22, 2000; *Sunday Times* June 25, 2000). Aside from changes to state benefit plans and workplaces, many of these articles in the conservative press also speak to the need to, as the *Times* puts it above, “make gender relations as a whole more favorable to women” even within the home.

While one does not expect to see such messages in overtly conservative newspapers, in this particular instance, it appears racism may trump sexism and may even overcome resistance to redistributive policies. That is, the fear of large-scale ethnic and cultural changes they associate with immigration seems more threatening in the discourse of the conservative-leaning newspapers than the fear of losing power based on male and class privilege. If this is the case, then offering women incentives to combine wage work with childbearing and pushing men to participate more in child rearing and housework becomes a concession to the claims of white working- and middle-class British women. Unfortunately, this concession is traded off against these elites clinging to racial power by excluding immigrant women and men from the future British nation.

Conservatives’ support for social policies that have long been advocated by feminist groups should be a source of some concern. First, and most important, a strong nativist sentiment lies at the heart of this push for change. This framing allows for the construction of a specifically racialized nationalism, a narrow definition of who is and is not an acceptable reproducer, and sacrifices the rights of nonwhite, nonnative women and men for the interests of women in the dominant group. The racism expressed strongly and emotionally in some of these newspapers is the poisoned root from which this pro-(white) woman rhetoric springs (Brown 2002).

Second, this rhetoric legitimates the continued ability of cultural elites to define who and what are good families. The possibility that women really would choose a lower birthrate even if they had the economic and social option to have more children is never even considered. Unlike the discourse aimed at women in less-developed countries, where lower fertility is seen as freeing women to develop other aspects of their lives, British women are culturally being defined as freer if they become more interested in motherhood.

Third, although the “bribing” articles are the only ones to bring in men explicitly as part of the reproductive picture by exploring men’s need to “(sometimes) wear the aprons,” they still position women as the primary reproducers. The bribe frame addresses policy to women, not men. Men are not seen as equally involved and responsible for reproduction and parenting; rather, they are still cast as women’s helpmates.

Bribing discourse as co-optation of feminist rhetoric has the potential to work against feminist political aims because, as Maria Stratigaki notes, co-optation gradually transforms concepts and their attendant political goals and may serve to hinder activism insofar as “it is difficult to mobilize against a claim that appears to be one’s ‘own’ even if it is no longer used to mean what one intended” (2004, 8). By co-opting feminist rhetoric about child care and discrimination, conservatives make it more difficult for feminists to criticize nationalist measures designed to encourage white British women to have more children.

In sum, the conservative papers’ willingness to bribe women to have children, even by encouraging more gender equality in social policy and family dynamics, rests on a top-down model of defining what is in women’s interests and an exclusionary definition of who is a potential member and reproducer of British culture. While offering a positive view of women, the fact that the bribing frame is most often offered in conservative papers where immigration is framed as most threatening should raise feminist concern.

## CONCLUSION

British newspapers do more than report the declining birthrate; they frame the transition to low fertility as a crisis for the nation. The anxiety expressed goes beyond potential economic problems to reflect dismay at the threat to “civilization” and “culture” posed by the changing composition of the national population. How British women understand their potential to bear children and perform reproductive labor is framed as critical to national survival.

Journalists offer four types of pronatalist messages that define appropriate, natural, healthy, or rational reproductive choices for women. Although these frames invoke both personal and national needs, they do not form a single continuum of positive or negative judgments about women and their choices. Thus, the complex and contested relationship between feminism and nationalism seems rooted in the varied normative judgments that these frames express.

We also expect that these empirically derived frames of begging, lecturing, threatening, and bribing women to do reproductive work for the nation would be found in other contexts. Although the critical discourse moment created by the UN report brought forth many such arguments, similar frames might be part of pronatalist projects, even in the United States where the population is reproducing at above-replacement levels. Looking at how specific American magazines target these frames along class or race lines, for example, in framing the future of the

United States as a “majority minority” nation, would be a useful direction for future research.

This analysis of British news media also reveals the interconnectedness of raced and gendered discourses, especially in discussions of nationhood and culture. The way the reproductive work of majority group women is represented implies racial framing since her pathological, irrational, and irresponsible reproductive choices jeopardize the hegemonic position of the dominant group. This is most evident in the linkage between anti-immigrant and pronatalist discourses in the conservative press and leads to the surprising finding that conservative newspapers frame pronatalism in the woman-positive language of the bribing frame. In encouraging policy makers to adopt measures that support women’s employment and family work, and even encouraging British men to do more at home, this discourse supports native-born women. Yet, it also positions their childbearing as an alternative to, and bulwark against, a more open immigration policy that is presented in negative and threatening terms. Thus, the needs of immigrant women, men, and families are framed as in opposition to the needs of native-born women, and racism against the former is used to justify feminist policies for the latter.

Thus, while it is easy for feminists to criticize the negative images of women presented in the lecturing and threatening frames, the more positively toned forms of pronatalism that bribing and begging frames express should also be viewed with caution. As this case suggests, even pronatalist projects offering concrete policy benefits to majority group women are not necessarily helpful for meeting all women’s interests.

## APPENDIX

All newspaper stories were accessed via the LexisNexis academic search engine. The 10 papers in the sample, with publication type and ideological focus, are listed below. An independent sample of articles ( $N = 100$ ) was taken from the same 10 publications during the same period to enable a comparison of debates on immigration absent treatment of declining fertility as a social problem. Articles are listed in descending order, with papers that problematized the presence of immigrants most listed at the top. The percent value following each publication indicates what percentage of articles in both samples ( $N = 302$ ) from that publication took a negative stance toward immigration or conditioned acceptance of immigrants on their cultural assimilation.

- The Daily Star* (tabloid; Conservative/Right, 100 percent)
- The Daily Telegraph/Sunday Telegraph* (mainstream; Conservative/Right, 84 percent)
- The Sun* (tabloid; Conservative/Right, 82 percent)
- The Daily Mail* (tabloid; Conservative/Right, 80 percent)
- The Times/Times on Sunday* (mainstream; Conservative/Right, 75 percent)
- The Daily Mirror/Sunday Mirror* (tabloid; Labour/Left, 55 percent)
- The Evening Standard* (mainstream; Conservative/Right, 46 percent)
- The Guardian* (mainstream; Labour/Left, 31 percent)
- The Financial Times* (mainstream; capitalist, similar to the *Wall Street Journal*, 27 percent)
- The Independent* (mainstream; Labour/Left, 19 percent)

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