

University of Nevada, Reno

**Children and Choice: Decisions, Dialogue, and Sites of Discursive Tension for Members
of Nonmutual Couples while Family Planning**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
Communication Studies

By

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Abstract

This study utilizes RDT 2.0 to analyze how family planning discourse between members of nonmutual couples, or couples where one member wants to have children and one member does not, shape reproductive decision-making and relational satisfaction. This study also examines the ways in which nonmutual couples work to reify or resist normative reproductive discourses. Contrapuntal analysis uncovered that competition between Childfree-Parenthood discourses were widely prevalent in nonmutual couples' family planning considerations and interaction with cultural assumptions of parenthood. In addition, salient discourse competition between Autonomy-Connection, Openness-Closedness, Stability-Change, and Similarity-Difference were found to play a role in nonmutual couples' family planning choices and relational satisfaction. Competing discourses of Autonomy-Connection and Similarity-Difference were also found to be involved in nonmutual couples' interaction with cultural reproductive expectations. Discursive interplay arose through nonmutual couples' use of entertaining, countering, and negating. This study outlines supplementary effects of findings and future directions for study.

Children and Choice: Decisions, Dialogue, and Sites of Discursive Tension for Nonmutual Couples while Family Planning

Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2019, the United States National Center for Health Statistics reported the lowest number of recorded births since 1985, and childbearing among women in their early 20's has reached a record low (Hamilton, et al., 2020). Related, Western societies have recently seen a shift away from the "nuclear family" and fewer couples are choosing to have children, instead voluntarily remaining childless (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Matthews & Desjardins, 2017). The decision to have or not have children is a significant point in many romantic relationships that is impacted by multiple social, economic, cultural, and relational factors. The decision of when or if to start a family is increasingly complicated when a couple is a nonmutual couple, meaning that within the dyad there is one individual with strong childless convictions and one individual who has a desire for parenthood (Lee & Zvonkovic, 2014). The member of the nonmutual couple who identifies as holding strong childless convictions is often described as an *early articulator* in relationship research (Lee & Zvonkovic, 2014; Matthews & Desjardins, 2017).

Despite the continued decrease in national birth rates and an increase in couples choosing to remain childless, research focusing specifically on a couple's decision to have children is sparse. Further, these relational decision-making processes that have not yet been studied in nonmutual couples. Such processes provide potential sites of oral

disagreement, or discursive struggles, in a romantic relationship. The current study explores the relational discourses by which nonmutual couples navigate the decision to become parents, or not, and examines how those same relational discourses simultaneously construct or do not construct relational satisfaction and/or reify or resist heteronormative expectations of family planning.

Previous studies (e.g., Blackstone & Stewart, 2016; Gillespie, 2003; Matthews & Desjardins 2017; Park, 2002, 2005) have examined reasons and motivations among individuals for choosing to be childfree, noting that while some reasons are consistently present for voluntarily childless (VC) individuals, other considerations are unique to women and men. Both women and men cited practical considerations (age, current living situation, or lack of partner), a general dislike of children, hesitation to raise a family in what they view as a hostile world for children, or personality traits not congruent with healthy parenting as reasons to remain childfree (Weston & Qu, 2001). A higher number of women reported a lack of “maternal instinct” and concerns about childbearing on their career success; however, men were more likely to explicitly state their disinterest in the perceived sacrifices of parenthood, such as the financial expense of having a family and inflexibility of schedule (Park, 2005).

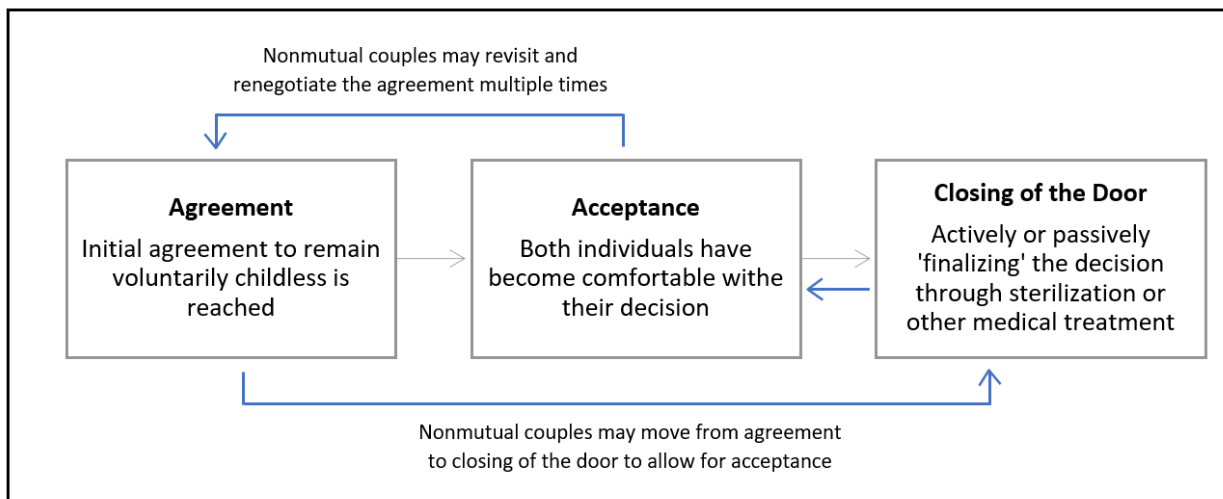
Existing studies on voluntary childlessness have also highlighted the experience of stigma and resistance among individuals who have chosen to be childfree. Scholars understand the techniques and strategies used by VC individuals when interacting with pronatalist ideologies, the ideological beliefs that a woman’s worth is tied to the

reproduction of human life (Park, 2002). Researchers have also examined the regrets individuals have about choosing to have children (Moore & Abetz, 2019), investigated how the roles of women and femininity are traditionally constructed around motherhood (Gillespie, 2000), discussed the function of childlessness as a negative counterpoint against motherhood (Morrell, 1994), and have explored the ways VC individuals shift their life stories in response to stigma around the decision to be childfree (Matthews & Desjardins, 2017). Despite these contributions, scholars have not yet examined the impact of such stigmas and pronatalist ideologies on how nonmutual couples construct their relationship *with each other*.

In 2014, a grounded theory of decision-making processes among VC couples was conducted by Lee and Zvonkovic and examined the decision to remain childless using typographical and temporal approaches. Their grounded theory study identified three decision-making types among VC couples: Couples where both persons entered into the relationship already having decided to be childfree, termed mutual *early articulator* couples; couples that continuously delayed the decision until it was deemed no longer an option by the couple, termed *mutual postponer* couples; and couples consisting of an individual with strong childless convictions and one with some degree of a desire for parenthood, termed *nonmutual* couples. The study also pointed to three key relational decision-making phases couples experience while deciding to be childfree: agreement, acceptance and closing of the door (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Model of Lee and Zvonkovic's (2014) phases of decision-making to remain childless



Although both early articulator and mutual postponer couples were found to have a relative linear progression through the three decision-making processes, nonmutual couples were found to have a more challenging time reaching the agreement stage and moving on to the acceptance phase. Once in the acceptance phase, nonmutual couples often had to move back into the agreement phase to renegotiate the terms of the agreement multiple times throughout the relationship. Additionally, some nonmutual couples reported skipping from agreement directly to closing of the door to help one or both individuals in the relationship reach acceptance phase. While other types of VC couples may skip phases, this reordering of phases is unique to nonmutual couples. Finally, Lee and Zvonkovic's (2014) study outlined two driving forces of what makes couples remain childfree in the decision-making process: strength of conviction towards childlessness and importance of the relationship over childbearing (Lee & Zvonkovic, 2014).

The grounded theory of decision-making processes among VC couples is foundational to this study, as the categorization of nonmutual couples opens the door to studying in greater depth the complexities of the decision-making process for nonmutual couples. The project presented in this thesis will expand upon the groundwork laid by Lee and Zvonkovic (2014) by taking a dialogic approach to examining the sites of discursive tension that exist as nonmutual couples (re)work toward their ultimate decision on whether to have children. Because this study examines the communication that happens while couples are deciding whether to have children, the definition of nonmutual couples will be expanded slightly for this study to include couples consisting of an individual with strong childless convictions and an individual with some degree of a desire for parenthood, *regardless of if the couple ultimately decides to have children or not.*

This study utilizes Baxter's (2011) Relational Dialectics Theory 2.0 (RDT) as its main theoretical framework. RDT is an interpersonal theory of relational meaning-making in which the main premise is that meaning is made through discursive sites of struggle and their resulting dialectical tensions (Baxter, 2011). It is important to emphasize here that in RDT the contradiction of discourses is a *discursive struggle*, and not a literal conflict between individuals or a psychological struggle within an individual's competing needs or motivations. Grounded in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism, RDT was created as a theory that allowed for an understanding of how individuals construct meaning through the interplay of competing discourses, a discursive struggle,

in their relational experiences (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Norwood, 2015). Discourse is a main component for RDT and can be thought of as a set of understandings that harmonize around a singular object of meaning, or even a system of meaning.

As a commonly cited example, Baxter (2004) illustrates discourse around a singular object of meaning using an apple. Some of the meaning of “apple” is what you would imagine as its physical or tangible traits, such as color and taste. Beyond its physical and tangible traits, there are a myriad of meanings existing within the term “apple”—someone could think of it in relation to the food group of fruit, or the many ways an apple could be eaten or prepared. Even more abstractly, part of the system of meaning, often called the discourse, of “apple” is the beliefs and values that are placed on the object. For example, an apple is traditionally viewed as a healthy food with positive value; however, someone who is allergic to apples would likely view an apple as dangerous and instead assign it a negative value. These multiple layers of meaning are found in all forms of meaning making and the meaning of a concept (an apple, in the above example) will always be enmeshed in a larger system of meaning.

In RDT, the importance of understanding the complex nature of discourse is essential, because what something means at any given moment will depend on the interaction of competing discourses that are circulating around the object of meaning at that point in time (Baxter & Norwood, 2015). Baxter and Braithwaite (2008) offer three main concepts to represent the key features of RDT. The first is that meaning comes from differing or contradictory discourse. Second, discourse is ongoing but is also

created in the moment. Third and finally, discourses constitute social reality and meaning is found in the interpenetration of different or opposing discourses. The goal of RDT, then, is to understand the ways in which meaning is generated through the interaction of competing discourses.

RDT is similar to other theories that take a constitutive view of communication, which positions communication as constitutive of one's reality rather than simply representative of an objective outside world (see Manning, 2020). In other words, communication is not something that happens in a relationship – but is what ultimately makes/constructs it (Manning, 2020). RDT is unique, however, in that it specifically examines how competing or opposing discourses create sites of meaning where the creation of relationship reality takes place. As Baxter and Braithwaite (2008) explain:

[C]onsciousness and identity are formed through communication with an Other. In everyday life we encounter different Others and serve as an Other on an ongoing basis ... For RDT the question is not how individuals, conceived as sovereign selves, deploy communication to represent their internal states or to self-present to others. Rather, the question is how difference constructs consciousness and identity. (pp. 7-8)

In its early stages, Relational Dialectics Theory, known as RDT 1.0, was designed as quantitative, post-positivist theory and sought to understand how the difference mentioned by Baxter and Braithwaite above constructs meaning through the form of three binaristic dialectical tensions common to most relationships: autonomy-connection, openness-closedness, and novelty-predictability. In recent years the next iteration of the theory, RDT 2.0, has gained popularity for its usefulness in interpretivist and critical approaches to communication research (Baxter, 2011; Suter &

Norwood, 2017). While the 2.0 version of RDT still maintains that certain meanings are socially created and perpetuated through communication, two differences separate RDT 1.0 and 2.0. The first difference is that instead of reducing discursive struggle to preset binaries, RDT 2.0 grants researchers flexibility to examine a multitude of site-specific discursive struggles, which in turn allows for more refined analysis of those struggles. The second difference is that RDT 2.0 acknowledges the inequality between more and less dominant discourses that influences the discursive interaction.

More recently, Baxter (2011) has argued that it is not simply the existence of the tensions that is important, but also *how* discourses compete. Often, discourses in struggle are not evenly legitimated, as some are centered (centripetal) and some are marginalized (centrifugal). Centripetal discourses are “discourses that are often centered in relational talk, easily legitimated, and frequently taken for granted” (Baxter & Norwood, 2015, p. 282). Opposite that are centrifugal discourses, which serve to decentralize and diversify meaning. Centripetal discourses will have more power within the discursive struggle, whereas a centrifugal discourse will have less. Baxter (2011) has identified many discursive practices intended to highlight some of the ways in which the struggle between more and less dominant discourses can be enacted. Because RDT illustrates the importance of the struggle of discourses, it makes sense that we would need to look beyond *what* the discursive struggle is about and instead examine *how* those competing discourses are managed, particularly because they are not weighted evenly. Three discourse markers can help us depict how individuals manage those competing discourses - *negating*, *countering*, and *entertaining* (Baxter, 2011; see also

Martin & White, 2005). *Negating* is a form of disclaiming, meaning that its role is to reject an existing discourse. *Negating* acknowledges a discourse for the purpose of refuting it. The second type of discourse marker is *countering*, in which a discursive position replaces an alternative discourse, particularly when that alternative discourse is centrifugal. *Countering* can be considered as offering an alternative discourse to replace the expected, or dominant, discourse. The third marker is *entertaining*. Central to the *entertaining* discourse marker is indication that one's discursive position is but one of many possible alternative discursive positions. *Entertaining* acknowledges that one's discursive position is not the only viable position, which brings other alternative discursive positions into focus.

RDT 2.0 as a theoretical framework suits this study due to competitive discourses naturally embedded in the negotiation required in nonmutual couples. Examining the discourse tensions embedded in nonmutual couples' construction of their relationship within the relational dyad and toward the external world provides a rich area to examine how nonmutual couples constitute relational satisfaction, navigate discursive inequality and culturally dominant systems of meaning around parenthood, and situate their relationship within a larger cultural context.

According to Lee and Zvonkovic, little research has been done on the decision-making processes of voluntarily childless (VC) couples; and based on my own review of the literature, even less on nonmutual couples. Research on VC couples has largely focused on how couples and individuals structure their identities around the

decision to not have children, and how couples and individuals interact with social stigmas after publicly identifying as VC (Avison & Furnham, 2015; Lee & Zvonkovic, 2014; Park, 2005; Pelton & Hertlein, 2011). A gap in the literature exists regarding how nonmutual couples discursively re(enter) into the agreement phase of whether or when to have children. To add to the literature on how nonmutual couples navigate the decision-making process of family planning, especially in terms of their interpersonal communication, this study proposes the following descriptive research question:

RQ1: What discourses animate the decision to have or not have a child for nonmutual couples?

Successful conflict resolution has been found to have a positive impact on relational satisfaction (Cramer, 2002; Givertz & Segrin, 2005), and existing literature has shown that couples who report low relational satisfaction display more negative communication behaviors during conflict resolution tasks than satisfied couples (Lavner, et al., 2016). Research considering relational satisfaction in romantic relationships has focused on conflict communication and relational maintenance (Douglas & Burgoon, 1991; Sanford, 2012; Ragdale, 1996), but not specifically on discussions around family planning. Literature that does consider relational satisfaction in childless couples is largely focused on couples who are experiencing infertility (Gana & Jakubowska, 2014; Greil, et al., 2018); however, no research has been done on relational satisfaction in nonmutual couples, despite the potential for conflict during discussions by nonmutual couples around family planning.

To address the gap in literature on relational satisfaction of nonmutual couples, this study takes a communication as constitutive of relationships perspective (CCR) in examining the relational satisfaction as described by nonmutual couples. Considering communication as constitutive of relationships focuses communication not as “a mere tool for expressing social reality but is also a means of creating it” (Manning, 2014) and allows this study to focus beyond simply *what* is being communicated about relational satisfaction in nonmutual relationships (e.g., message content) and instead toward *how* communication creates each individual’s understanding of their satisfaction within the relationship (e.g., constitutive function; Manning, 2020). This study proposes the following second research question to better understand how nonmutual couples constitute relational satisfaction:

RQ2: How, if at all, do the identified discourses construct a perception of relational satisfaction in nonmutual couples?

Both RDT and the CCR perspective highlight the complexity inherent in viewing communication as constitutive of relationships. While relationships are often conceptualized using a container model, viewing interpersonal communication as communication between two persons and is contained within that singular relationship, CCR perspective suggests that “communication constructs a relationship [which] often comes from external audiences of a given relationship” (Manning, 2020, p. 36). Similarly, RDT examines the impact of distal already-spoken discourses—pre-existing discourses circulating in the culture at large—on the way relationships are constituted by its members in relation to external existing discourses (Baxter, 2011). Relationships, then,

are not static, isolated, self-contained entities but rather a continual process of communication constituted and impelled, at least in part, by influences external to the dyadic relationship. Such external entities can be found on the micro-level, such as questions or advice presented by friends and family, or on the macro-level, such as cultural expectations and institutional restrictions (Baxter, 2011; Manning, 2020). Particularly salient for this study are discourses of reproductive normativity, a term coined by Hintz & Brown (2020), to describe the cultural assumptions about parenthood, including that having children is normal and natural, that young couples should desire parenthood for personal and social reasons, and that the benefits of having children outweigh the potential costs.

Recent scholarship has called for the use of feminist and queer theory in family and interpersonal communication research (Chevrette, 2013; Manning & Denker, 2015; Suter, 2016), even for studies where participants are primarily heterosexual (Manning, 2015; Manning & Adams, 2022). Given this study's focus on heteronormative and gendered expectations related to traditional or nuclear families, I respond to the call for critical examination of interpersonal and family communication research. Specifically, I address the ways heteronormative values are embedded or resisted in discourse by nonmutual couples. Thus, this study includes a third and final research question:

RQ3: In which ways do discourses of nonmutual voluntary childless couples reify and resist heteronormative relationship and family planning expectations?

Given the literature and three research questions presented here, a complex approach to data collection and analysis is needed. That approach is described in Chapter 2.

Chapter 2: Methodology

This chapter provides an outline of research methods that were utilized in the study. Chapter Two describes the research design and analysis methods chosen for this study, as well as justifications for each analysis method employed. Additionally, this chapter presents information on the participants, including the criteria for participant inclusion in the study, general data about the participants, and how they were sampled. Finally, this chapter outlines the instruments used for data collection and the procedure that was followed to gather data for this study.

Dyadic Approach

In many family and relationship-oriented research studies, scholars will collect data from one member of the relationship/family and treat that data as if it fairly and accurately represents all the members of the couple or family relationship (Manning & Kunkel, 2015). To offer a stronger sense of how a relationship is constructed across its members, Manning and Kunkel (2015) argue that interviewing multiple relationship members—both individually and together—is a way to make good sense of differences and similarities across relationship viewpoints and understandings. Given that I am considering couple discourses, and especially given that I am examining how discourses compete or contrast, it is important that I embrace an approach that allows me multiple

senses of how members of a couple understand their relationship (Manning, 2013; Manning & Kunkel, 2014). As explained by Manning & Kunkel (2015):

[I]nterviewing each participant in a couple-relationship separately, the similarity or overlap in answers can be identified, as well as the difference or contrast. That, in turn, allows for researchers to see beyond each individual interview and into the meaning, perceptions of reality, and sense-of-being experienced by a dyad. (p. 186)

Because I am looking specifically to examine discursive tensions present not only within an individual member's recounting of experiences, but between members of the couple-relationship as well, a dyadic approach is a strong fit for this project. While dyadic methods can be used for by conducting joint interviews or individual interviews of dyads, this study utilizes individual interviews because the interview protocol is designed to seek individual viewpoints and stories while encouraging participants to share their perspectives on potentially sensitive topics, such as their current levels of relational happiness and reasons for wanting to be parents, or not. Individual interviews of dyads are the best match for this study because they allow for participants to respond without worry that their partner may learn private opinions or concerns (Manning & Kunkel, 2015).

Interviews

This study also employs open-ended depth interviews. Interviews are used to gain access to and understand another person's perspective about real-world experiences that are not otherwise easily observable (Manning & Kunkel, 2015; see also Keyton, 2010). When enacted like purposeful conversations, interviews allow researchers and participants to co-create a shared understanding of the topic being

discussed. For this study, I utilized a semi-structured interview protocol to ensure all goals of the interview are met while simultaneously allowing the interviewer to adapt to the responses provided by each participant. This use of semi-structured interviews allows the use of open-ended interview questions to help shed light and expand upon the particular ways a specific participant conceptualizes the relationship they have with their partner. This type of interview protocol acts more as a checklist for the researcher to make sure they have successfully met key questions and provides flexibility for the researcher to ask additional questions for clarity, or probe for more in-depth responses. This type of interview protocol is useful for interpretive studies in which the researcher has not set out to prove the existence of a phenomena or find specific information hypothesized to exist, but rather is looking to understand participants' lived experiences and interpret how *they* make sense of those experiences.

Methods

An interview protocol was created (see Appendix A) for this study. Ten audio-recorded interviews that ranged in length from 60–120 minutes were then conducted. The interviews were conducted individually and virtually through the videoconferencing software Zoom with five women and five men, aged 25-64, in five married heterosexual relationships. The relationships ranged in length from 8 to 22 years. Of the five couples interviewed, two couples had one or more children, two couples were childfree, and one couple did not currently have children but were trying to conceive.

A recruitment announcement was circulated to the first author's acquaintances and posted on online social platforms. Criteria for inclusion require participants to be 18 years or older, be part of a couple currently in a romantic relationship, and one individual in the relationship must identify as an early-articulator individual. Each member of the eligible couples were interviewed, but the participants were interviewed separately. All participants were given pseudonyms.

Prior to the interview, informed consent was obtained and participants were asked to complete a basic demographic survey—to allow for maximum use of the scheduled interview time—and the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI-32) (see Appendix B). The CSI-32 data was used as a conversation prompt during the interview, not as a quantitative measure, and will be used as additional text to further identify overall levels of relational satisfaction and tensions present in participants' written answers and verbal expressions of relational satisfaction. During the interview, participants were asked reflexive questions about their relationship and asked to share their views on parenthood, their perception of their partners' views on parenthood, and reflect on past experiences they've had about deciding whether to have children with their partner. The participants were invited to add anything else they deemed important at the end of their interview. This study protocol was approved by the institutional research ethics board for the University of Nevada, Reno.

Thematic, Theoretical-heuristic Analysis, and Contrapuntal Analysis

Three forms of analysis were used for this study: thematic analysis, theoretical-heuristic analysis, and contrapuntal analysis.

Thematic analysis. The data collected from this study were first analyzed using Braun & Clark's (2006) thematic analysis method as a first-cycle coding method (see Saldaña, 2008) to classify overarching themes found in descriptions of how nonmutual couples make the decision to have, or not have, children. Thematic analysis is useful for topics which have not been widely explored or have not been explored in the context utilized in the study. As both criteria fit with this project, thematic analysis was used.

Thematic analysis involves six steps. First, the researcher must become familiar with their dataset, either by reading through interview transcripts or listening to the interview recordings multiple times. Next, initial codes need to be created—all data should be coded, and new codes can be generated at any point in this step. Step three is to create themes from the codes found in the previous step by combining similar codes into larger categories. This can be a multilayered step, where codes are combined into smaller themes, which in turn can be combined to create larger themes. After themes are created, the following step is to review the themes to ensure that the data is effectively represented in the themes created. Step four involves a member check to ensure that the themes generated make sense to external members. Following, step five is to define the final themes and create final names for each theme that are clear and appropriate. Finally, data exemplars should be chosen for inclusion in the study report that will best illustrate the theme.

This first-cycle thematic analysis will inform RQ1.

Theoretical-heuristic analysis using feminist and queer theory. A second round of analysis will utilize a feminist and queer theory-based critique of the data (Manning & Denker, 2015) in which feminist and queer theory are used as a theoretical lens to create categories of understanding and to highlight patterns of communication that nonmutual couples use to reify or resist heteronormative expectations to inform RQ3. The “plugging in” of queer and feminist theory as lenses for coding allows for additional vantage points from which to view the same set of data and provide a layered understanding of how nonmutual relationships are communicatively constructed in the context of larger social expectations of relationships (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013; Manning & Denker, 2015).

Important to using these theoretical bodies as heuristics for understanding the data is understanding the theories themselves. Queer theory seeks to deconstruct sexual regimes, meaning that queer theory can be seen as a form of resistance to dominant discourses, particularly around gender, sexuality and identity (Manning & Adams, 2022). Queer theory is often used as a tool to analyze data reflexively, particularly with qualitative studies such as this one. In this study, queer theory is utilized to investigate the dominant cultural discourses of gender and sexuality, defined as heteronormativity, in relation to nonmutual couples.

Feminist theory acknowledges women’s perspectives on their experiences and counts those experiences when researching cultural life (Wood, 2015). Two main concepts are essential to feminist theory are gender and patriarchy. Gender is the social

meanings that are attached to sex by oneself and others, and our embodiment, or non-embodiment, of those social meanings (Butler, 1993). The other key concept is patriarchy—a system that reflects the perspectives, values, interests and experiences of men as a group. Feminist theory, then, aims to investigate the social roles, experiences and perspectives of women to value women’s lived experiences and to expose gender inequality in society (Wood, 2015).

Using these theories as a sensitizing heuristic allows for insights regarding cultural expectations of childbearing in couples/families and especially how women are charged with the responsibility of childbearing in families.

Contrapuntal analysis. Following the first two coding cycles, the data will be further analyzed using contrapuntal analysis (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Norwood 2015) to examine competing discourses found in a nonmutual couple’s perceived relational satisfaction and negotiations around family planning. Contrapuntal analysis is a form of discourse analysis that concentrates on the interaction of contrasting discourses in written or spoken texts, utilizing the guiding analytical question, “What are the competing discourses in the text and how is meaning constructed through their interplay?” (Baxter, 2011, p. 152).

As outlined by Scharp and Thomas (2022), contrapuntal analysis includes the following five steps. First, the researcher must identify a semantic object, which can also be described as narrowing focus to pertinent discourses. For this study, there are two semantic objects: parenthood and relational satisfaction. Next the researcher must

select a text to examine for those salient discourses. The text(s) chosen for this study are the interview transcriptions. The third and fourth steps are to identify discourses that are found within the text and explore discursive interplay of those discourses, respectively. And finally, the researcher should explain ways in which their findings challenge the assumptions and fixed meanings surrounding those semantic objects. Contrapuntal analysis is a strong fit for this study because it was created as a tool for analysis in conjunction with RDT 2.0. Analyzing the data from this study using contrapuntal analysis and sensitized by RDT will inform both RQ1 and RQ2 by allowing an investigation into naturally competing discourses and tensions found in relationships between early articulator individuals and their partners.

Chapter 3: Findings

This chapter presents research findings based on data analysis of the interviews. Findings were tested for validity through data conferencing (Braithwaite, et al., 2017) and member checks (Manning & Kunkel, 2014), and are presented in relation to the research questions for the study in line with the procedures outlined in Chapter Two.

Data analysis indicated the following dialectical tensions: autonomy-connection, openness-closedness, stability-change, similarity-difference, and childfree-parenthood. Each of these dialectical tensions were present in all the participants' responses. The above tensions were accompanied by at least one of Baxter's (2011) discourse markers: *entertaining*, *countering*, and/or *negating*. The interplay of each tension and marker is described in Table 1. Given the scope of this project, and in following Manning & Kunkel

(2014), I narrowed my findings to tension/marker combinations, or themes, that are salient to the research questions posed. As my presentation of data indicates, I focused on the themes most salient to my research questions (see Table 1).

Table 1.

Dialectical Tensions and Discourse Markers Found in Interviews Conducted with Nonmutual Couples. N=10 interviews.

Dialectical Tension	Contextual Position	Contextual Sub-Position	Discourse Marker	Description
Autonomy-Connection	Connection with Partner		Entertaining	Participant discusses their needs and approaches for connection with their partners, while also acknowledging that their partners often have separate and different needs for connection and separation from <i>them</i> .
	Connection with Family ^{2,3}		Negating	Participant discusses the ways in which they create distance from the expectations of family, refuting their families' assumptions about how relationships and parenting should be conducted.
	Connection Future Children ¹		Entertaining	Participant discusses their hopes of connection and bonding with their potential future children, while also recognizing that those future children, and themselves, are individuals with unique personalities and needs to be fulfilled.
	Connection with Current Children		Negating	Participant with children discusses their desire to be "good parents" while disclaiming the perceived social expectation that parents should always prioritize the needs of their child in order to be considered a "good parent". Participants also discuss the need to connect with their children while refuting the expectation to

				control them.
Openness-Closedness	Openness with Partner			
		Authentic Self ²	Countering	Participant discusses feeling that they can be authentically themselves, countering the implicit expectation that their current relationships mirror their experiences from previous relationships in which they had to alter their expression in some way.
		My vs. Our Problem	Negating	Participant discusses when they choose not to share something with their partner because it is viewed as “my” problem, not “our” problem, refuting the perceived expectation that individuals should share all their troubles with their partner.
		Speaking Needs	Countering	Participant discusses the ways in which they share their relational needs with their partner, despite the implicit social expectation that their partner should <i>just know</i> what they need.
	Openness with Family			
		Outbound Sharing with Family	Entertaining	Participant discusses what they choose to share with their families about their partners and children, while acknowledging that in past occasions they could have shared more or less for a more preferable outcome.
		Messages Received by Family ¹	Negating	Participant discusses their refutation of messages they’ve received from their families that

			have had a negative impact on themselves, their relationships, or their views about parenthood.
	Openness with Social Circle		Entertaining Participant discusses the ways in which they view others' relationships, acknowledging that in many ways those relationships may be better or worse than their own.
	Openness with Children		Entertaining Participant discusses their degree of information sharing with their children, while acknowledging that they may be seen as over- or under-sharing.
Stability-Change ²			Entertaining Participant discusses the way in which they adjust during times of change within their relationship while also looking forward to times of stability, acknowledging that both are important to relational happiness.
Similarity-Difference	Difference in relation to Partner ²		Entertaining: Participant discusses the ways in which they navigate communicative needs that are different from their partner, while acknowledging that their partner's communicative needs are also important to consider and accommodate. Negating: Participant refutes the implicit assumption that differences are inherently bad or damaging to a relationship.
	Difference in relation to Social Circle ³		Negating Participant discusses the differences between their relationships and the relationships they see around

				them, refuting the expectation that their relationships look similar to other “good relationships” to be successful.
	Difference in relation to Future and Current Children		Countering	Participant discusses the benefits of a partnership with someone who has a difference in (potential) parenting styles, countering the social expectation that parents always be on the same page to parent effectively.
Childfree-Parenthood ^{1,3}			Entertaining Countering Negating	<p>Entertaining: Participant discusses their opinions on wanting children, while acknowledging that their partner does not necessarily share their valuation of parenthood.</p> <p>Countering: Participant discusses how their views of parenthood have changed over time, countering their past beliefs about becoming a parent.</p> <p>Negating: Participant discusses the ramifications of having children both personally and for their relationship, refuting the sociocultural expectation that having children is “just what you do.”</p>

Salient categories: RQ1 = ¹, RQ2 = ², RQ3 = ³

Findings for Research Question One

Research question one asks, “What discourses animate the decision to have or not have a child for nonmutual couples?” There are three salient themes that help illustrate the discourses present: Autonomy-connection with future children, openness-closedness in relation to messages received by family, and a childfree-parenthood discourse.

Autonomy-Connection with Future Children: One of RDT’s originally described dialectical tensions is the tension between autonomy and connection in relationships. This tension describes the struggle in meaning between the ties and interrelation with those around us—such as one’s partner, family or social circle—versus the desire to separate oneself as a unique individual (Montgomery & Baxter, 1996). While autonomy-connection is generally used to describe the struggle in meaning between independence and interrelation with existing entities, such as one’s partner, this discursive struggle was also apparent as participants talked about their hopes of connection and bonding with their *potential* future children. This tension of autonomy and connection with future children was animated by participants’ entertaining of many outcomes for connection with their future child, particularly when recognizing that those future children, and they themselves, are individuals with unique personalities and needs to be fulfilled. For example, during an interview with Manuel, he discusses his concerns when talking about what he thinks about his interactions with his child in the future, should he have one:

Um, and then, you know, with that too, the, the fear is, you know, that I, I won't meet those expectations that no matter what I do, you know, um, the child is still not receptive to me or, you know, like, doesn't, uh, consider me, like, a meaningful person in their life, even though I'm like their, their father, you know?

Through the statement that he fears that his child will not be receptive to him as a father, Manuel acknowledges the balance between connection of parent and child, and the autonomy of his future child to view him as not meaningful in their lives. Similarly, Derek talks about how he hopes that his future children will be able to bond with him over hobbies, yet entertains the possibility that his children could not like him as just as plausible an option as the potential that they would enjoy his company:

I fear that they'll like the stuff she likes to do. (laughter). I'm just kidding. I'm totally kidding. No, um, I just fear, you know, not being good enough. Or that they won't like me. But that's a, a daily fear and I just don't want to drag that into parenthood.

The tension between autonomy and connection with their future children is evident in both Manuel and Derek's quotes, as they express a desire to have connection with their children while acknowledging their future child's autonomy in their potential relationship.

This dialectical tension also showed up in slightly different form for Aadav, who said when discussing his future children:

I think we ta- we talked about, we talked about our aspirations as individuals... and how we can make those aspirations happen... even with a baby in the mix. Um, which was very different. Right? Because the focus was not on being a parent. The focus was on me as an individual.

In Aadav's example, the tension present between connection and autonomy isn't the same as Derek's and Manuel's - instead, Aadav's quote shows a tension between his ability to be autonomous in decision making about life goals and the connection or "tied down-ness" that he perceives as a part of having children. In this example, Aadav is

responding to the larger centripetal discourse that once you have children, your life should be structured around their needs instead of your own ("...the focus was not on being a parent"), through the use of entertaining other possible discourses ("...how can we make those aspirations happen").

Openness-Closedness in Relation to Messages Received by Family:

Openness-closedness is a dialectical tension explored by Montgomery & Baxter (1996) that describes the pull between the need to be open and share information versus the need to be exclusive and private. This openness-closedness tension appears when participants discuss the struggle about disclosure with their families, particularly the impact of what their family shares, or not, with them. This tension is particularly evident as they negate the messages they've received from their families that have had a negative impact on or their views about parenthood. For example, John talks about how his mother's feelings about children influenced his own:

Because she [my mother], I, I don't think I was planned. Um, and then she wasn't a big fan of kids. I mean, she loves me, I know, but that, no issue there. But, um, but she never really liked kids. You know, she was always kind of annoyed by 'em and I think that's kind of where I started learning it from. And... But, you know, I have respect for her 'cause she did it all by herself and, and I didn't turn to drugs or any of that. So, she did a good job. Yeah. Yeah. But I, I think, yeah, it does make a big impression on me just growing up, hearing it and, "No, no, I'm never having, I'm not having any more kids. No."

In this example, John's mother was open to him about her feelings on children and that openness was something that influenced John's lack of desire for children. In contrast, while she would share her dislike of children with John, she kept her struggles as a single mother from him. He negates his mother's dislike of children by asserting that despite her annoyance of

children, she loved him as a child. Through this example, John navigates the tension between his mother's openness and closedness about parenthood with him.

A second example of this dialectical tension comes from Danica as she discusses her mother's stances on harmful body expectations for her future child:

Because there were times where they would say things that were repetitive of things that I grew up in, and I'm like, "Uh-uh (negative), that's not flying." And, uh, one of those big ones with my mom was weight. And ... Because, you know, when I was growing up, my mom was like, you know, "You're- you're getting too fat, you need to lose some weight, you need to do this." And that is so destructive for teenage girls. Like, you'd get enough of that at school. You don't need that from home. I didn't want anyone to know my weight - not even my mom. And so, you know, 'cause I don't wanna repeat that cycle. So, those are times where I'm like, ah, I feel like I'm doing it right. Because I want her to have that freedom, you know? 'Cause who does it hurt? It doesn't hurt anybody- she's gained a pound or two. My god. You know?

This example highlights the tension between Danica's mother's openness when critiquing her daughter's weight and Danica's desire for privacy about her and her daughter's bodies. For Danica, her mother's openness about negative stigmas around weight and beauty standards was not something she wanted to pass onto her future daughter. Instead, Danica is choosing to negate the discourse around beauty standards by replacing it with a counter discourse that doesn't center weight gain as a negative issue.

Childfree-Parenthood: The childfree-parenthood dialectical tension is one that I have iteratively created for this project based on participant discourses. This novel tension appears when participants discuss the multiple facets of parenthood they consider when asked to talk about themselves as future or current parents. All of the participants reflected on the pull between their lives and priorities as childfree and how those may change when they become

parents. The *entertaining*, *countering*, and *negating* markers were all used when participants were discussing the childfree-parenthood tension.

Entertaining is used when participants discuss their personal opinions on wanting children, as they acknowledge that their partner does not necessarily share their valuation of parenthood and may have alternate opinions. This is shown particularly well when looking at the responses from a married couple, Priya and Aadav, as they share their experiences with deciding whether or not to keep an unplanned pregnancy. For example, Priya entertains the reasons that her husband, Aadav, had for not wanting to go forward with the pregnancy:

It was sort of like, okay. Like, it's happening. Like, we're not 16 anymore. We have a house, we have a job, we have [a] decent life, you know, we can support a child. Um, but I also didn't think of it from how much it's going to change our lives' perspective. So, and that's like, 100% Aadav's personality. He's thinking about like, everything and like, oh, like, imagining how our life is gonna change. And knowing who I am, understanding how much harder it's gonna be, like, he's coming from that perspective. Versus, I was like, thinking of all the like, positives of why this is happening right now.

In this statement, Priya shares how her optimism was not necessarily shared by her husband, but rather than try to replace it with a discourse of her own (e.g., “I was thinking of all the positives”), she entertains her husband’s concerns as a valid alternative discourse (e.g., “how much harder it’s gonna be”). When discussing how he and Priya ultimately chose to keep their first pregnancy, Aadav shows a similar response to the childfree-parenthood tension:

If we, the way I look at it, I mean, we love to travel, but so the way I look at it is like, if I were standing in front of like the, let's say the, um, the Eiffel Tower. Um, and we'd gone through with the abortion, the, um, the thought that, you know, maybe there could have been another one in this picture, in this scenery with us- would've probably come up. Right? And it, maybe not for me, but at least for her. Right? Uh, but it 100% would've come up. Um, if we have a kid it's gonna be there and somebody has to take care of it now (laughs), right? And so we, um, we just had to talk about it. Um, it sounds easy today, but really I think there was an exercise that we did, um, jotting down what are the

five reasons I think we're ready and what are the five reasons we think we're not ready. And so I forget all my reasons right now. I think one was, I wanted to do a startup. I wanted to kind of travel. I kind of wanted to do other things. And so the question became, you know, "Can we do this? Can we, can we still do this by having a kid or can we not?"

In this excerpt, Aadav acknowledges that while he might not consider their lack of a child as a loss while in his future travels, his wife likely will. Although Aadav's stance is that having children will hinder his ability to complete his life goals, such as traveling, he entertains the alternative discourse that traveling with a child is not only possible but also potentially fulfilling. Both Priya and Aadav express their considerations about remaining childfree or choosing to become parents while actively recognizing that their partners are coming from a different orientation and entertaining each other's discourses as valid.

Countering is also used by participants as they discuss their views on becoming a parent and consider the changes that having children would bring about, particularly when their views on becoming a parent have changed over time. Adam discusses how his belief that he would have a large family changed when he met his wife:

And I have a ton of cousins. And I, I thought that having a big family sounded like a lot of fun. And that that would be something that I would want when I eventually found someone. And, but when, when I did eventually meet someone and then found Danica, we had such a great time being together just the two of us that that no longer appealed to me. And so, you know, the amount of time and, uh, and effort that I felt would be required to be responsible for somebody else would im- impact me to such a degree that I wasn't ready for, um, for that. And so, uh, we very much enjoyed spending time together just the two of us. And I don't know if a, um ... Especially with all the socializing and things that we did. I, we, I would never would have been able to do that with, with a little, little one. Even with a babysitter. But, uh, yeah, when we first started and, and, and really started to develop a relationship, we're like, "Man, this is just so great. Just the two of us. Why would we wanna have, you know, something else added on to it?"

In his response, Adam is countering his belief that he wanted a large family and that a large family would be fun with the alternative discourse that he and his wife have a lot of fun *without* kids. In this excerpt, we see Adam replace one discourse (e.g., “I want a large family”) with another, alternative, discourse (e.g., “Man, this is so great, just the two of us”). We see a similar discourse counter and replacement from Jenni:

Yeah. So I guess, um, he just said, he's never had that desire. And I used to be like, "We would have the cutest kids," (laughing) you know, and, but you know. Then, I look at it now, and I look at the world now, and I'm like, "There is no way (laughing) I would want my kids to be in this world, right now."

Jenni discusses how she used to want children, but she counters her previous desire with a new discourse that highlights why she wouldn't want children anymore. This second discourse about the world not being good for kids has displaced her initial discourse of wanting children, despite the centripetal power of the initial discourse. Jenni is supplanting the socially powerful discourse that children are adorable, fun and rewarding with the alternative, and less socially powerful, discourse that the world is currently not a safe space for raising children.

Finally, *negating* was used as participants discuss their considerations of the ramifications of having children, refuting the sociocultural expectation that having children is natural or easy because it is “just what you do.” Anastasia shares what she thinks about when imagining having kids:

Um, giving up the, you know, quiet time, right? Um, you know, and, and the selfishness of let's just, you know, go on a wine trip, let's go see a comedy show it's super late. And, you know, just being able to get up and go, um, plus or minus a dog, but, you know, those are easy enough. Um, but gaining, you know, there's, what they say is there's no love like the love of a child. And, and to see, you know, physically, biologically, right? The, the love of Derek and I be turned into a child, which I think is just crazy, like biologically,

how does that happen? I, it still blows my mind. But it's not easy and it's just too- it's just too much to give up right now, you know?

In this example, Anastasia discusses how her life will become more complicated with children and acknowledges the alternative discourse that the love of your child makes those complications worth it to then negate that alternative discourse by saying that she doesn't think that the idea of children's love being worth the flexibility sacrifice is entirely true for her just yet.

In a separate example, Aadav talks about how he balked when he saw a parent and child together:

But, um, but I- literally about six to eight months prior to Priya getting pregnant I saw this, uh, uh, you know, don't, don't ask me for logical reasoning. But I saw this dad and daughter on a bike, um, while we were driving, and like, my life flashed in front of me and I was like, "Shit, my life is going to be about my kids. Then, it's going to be about my grandkids. And then I'm going to die."

When Aadav saw the father and daughter biking together, which is classic iconography of parent-child bonding, he refuted the accompanying sociocultural discourse that children add enrichment to their parents' lives. Aadav supplies an alternative discourse about fearing his life will revolve around his children for the purpose of refuting the initial discourse even in the absence of another co-present speaker.

Revisiting the Research Question

Research question one asked, "what discourses animate the decision to have or not have a child for nonmutual couples?" In investigating which discourses animate the decision to have or not have a child for nonmutual couples, there were three discursive tensions found to be

particularly salient for nonmutual couples. First, the discursive tension between autonomy and connection with participants' imagined future children highlighted the ways that participants entertained the many possible outcomes for connection with their future child. Nonmutual couples acknowledged that despite their wish for their future children to have a strong relationship with them (discourse of connection), but also recognized that their future children are individuals with unique personalities and needs to be fulfilled (discourse of autonomy). The openness-closedness tension was also present and appeared when participants discussed the impact of the information that their family shares, or not, with their decision to have children. This tension is particularly evident as the couples discussed working to negate the messages they'd received from their families which had a negative impact on or their overall views about parenthood. A new discursive tension was found in this study, childfree-parenthood, and this tension was present for all the participants interviewed. The childfree-parenthood tension reflected the pull that nonmutual couples felt between their childfree lives and priorities and how those aspects of their lifestyle would change when they become parents by *entertaining*, *countering* and *negating* the discourses of childfree and parenthood.

Findings for Research Question Two

Research question two asks, "How, if at all, do the identified discourses construct a perception of relational satisfaction in nonmutual couples?" There are four salient themes that help illustrate the discourses present: Autonomy-connection with family, openness-closedness with partner, stability-change, and similarity-difference with partner.

Autonomy-Connection with Family: This tension was apparent when participants discussed the ways in which they create distance from the expectations of their family, while

balancing the need for a strong familial relationship. Interestingly, this tension was illustrated through the use of the *negating* discourse marker, because participants discussed their desire for both autonomy and connection with their family through the refutation of their families' assumptions or expectations about how and when they should be moving forward in their relationships or starting a family. For example, Anastasia talks about how she feels that she's still learning to balance her closeness with her family with her own life path and the fact that her and her partner are taking longer to decide whether to have children:

Um, and so working through that and realizing you are your own person separate of your family has been very important, no matter how much you love them or see them. And same goes for me, right? Of, yes, there's this life path. Yes, that's what's expected, um, but I don't have to have that life path in the same way that my family designates. So it, it took us about three and a half, four years to get to that point and for me to, right? Deconstruct myself far enough away from my family to say, oh, wait, I'm not, I don't have to follow my family's expectations for this, right? I am my own adult. I can make my own choices.

In this excerpt, Anastasia discusses how even though she loves her family, she needed to remove herself from their expectations for her relationship and life path. She was able to do that by refuting her family's discourse about how and when a relationship should evolve to instead separate herself and her partnership from those expectations.

In another example, Aadav talks about how his wife was highly connected to her family, and even though he reports a good relationship with his in-laws, he feels it's important to spend time with just your partner, especially in times of discomfort:

And, um, one of the decisions that she said is, you know, maybe for comfort, I'll bring my parents along. And that's something I really didn't want because I was like, "Well, this is our time to figure our life out-... and this would be a perfect place and time to put ourselves in a very uncomfortable situation, really kind of figure this out."

In this example, Aadav nullifies his wife's invitation to her parents on their trips, negating the discourse of connectedness with her parents. He acknowledges the benefit of bringing his in-laws—increased comfortability during the trip—with the purpose of rejecting it for the alternative discourse that the increased level of difficulty of the trip without them will increase connection between him and his wife.

Openness-closedness with partner by disclosing one's authentic self: When participants talked about the ways in which they felt that their partner was a good fit for them, each participant brought up the feeling that they could be authentically oneself with their partners. After analyzing those sections, it was apparent that the participants were countering the implicit expectation that their current relationships mirror their experiences from previous relationships in which they had to alter their expression in some way. John notes that his relationship with his wife is unique from other relationships he has had:

Uh, totally different. I, I don't think I could ever be myself around anybody else. Um, I've never been married before, but even really close to it. And I haven't had a whole lot of relationships in my life, but I, I never really felt comfortable and really couldn't just be myself.

Though not explicitly stated, John is countering the implicit centripetal discourse that he should be able to be himself with any of his partners by asserting that his wife is the only relational partner that he feels comfortable to fully express himself. In this example, John's ability to express himself with his wife (discourse of openness) is tied to his inability to express those same feelings with past relational partners (discourse of closedness). Alternatively, in another example, Kristina talks about how they were able to be more authentically herself after Kristina and her husband, then-boyfriend, broke up early in the relationship:

Yeah. So I feel like that also took it to where I could talk to him about literally anything because I, there was no fear of looking like a bad person to him. Because after that, I could show him everything 'cause it's like, you know, I knew that he wouldn't make me feel bad for having the thoughts that I was having or if I was having doubts about a specific thing, he could, I could tell him that. And he would, he would understand and, and not, like, completely like it would just destroy this image that he had created.

In this example, Kristina is referencing looking like a “bad person” for sharing her doubts and fears based on past relationship experience where that had been an issue. Kristina counters the discourse of closedness due to fear of looking like a bad person by countering that discourse with one of openness and understanding by her husband.

Stability-change within the partnership: Montgomery & Baxter (1996) describe the stability-change tension as the interplay of stability and flux—that is to say stability punctuates change and acts as a baseline by which change is noticed. Participant responses indicate the presence of the stability-change dichotomy as they discuss the way in which they adjust during times of change within their relationship while also looking forward to times of stability. The discourse marker found for this tension is *entertaining*, where the participants balance discourses of change as either highly positive or highly negative. For example, John talks about how he and his wife grow closer when they're traveling and how he also looks forward to quiet time with her:

Um, with the traveling, I think we are just so happy when we're seeing new things and going somewhere... the build up to, and when we get there. Um, uh, the other side of it is, you know, the, the downtime of after work all day and just coming home and having our same old routine and sure is predictable and everything, but I look forward to coming home and sitting on the couch with her and playing with the dogs (laughs).

In this way, John is highlighting both sides of this discursive tension: He positions a discourse of change as positive for the relationship (e.g., “...we are just so happy when

we're seeing new things and going somewhere") while also entertaining a discourse of stability as positive (e.g., "...I look forward to coming home and sitting on the couch with her"). John entertains both a discourse of change and a discourse of stability as important and viable for relational satisfaction.

Similarly, one of the couples interviewed, Derek and Anastasia, show the pull between stability and change as they talk about what they appreciate about their relationship. Derek describes his relationship with his wife as, "...a rollercoaster. However, in a, probably a different way, 'cause it's not ups and downs, it's anticipation and excitement the whole way" and continues with:

It's a, it's, there, there, there's steps like, there'll be a, a time of improvement and then we'll, we'll stay there for a while, and then we'll hit another moment of, well, some improvement and then we'll stay steady for a while or whatever.

On the other hand, Anastasia describes the strength in their relationship through highlighting the stability that they have when negotiating change:

Um, but also in that, we've realized that there is, um, you know, a, a level of communication and commitment and stability. I know I keep coming back to stability, but that's, that's where it is. Um, that we can create ourselves. And for him, knowing that there is someone that will always be there to help him create that stability, I think is a very huge, um, thing for him, that he's not just going through this life thing on his own and expected to just figure it out.

For Derek, it's those moments of change that punctuate his relationship and bring excitement, but for Anastasia the stability is what allows her husband to be able to navigate those times of change with her in a healthy way. While Derek clearly favors a discourse of change and Anastasia clearly favors a discourse of stability, they both acknowledge the importance and validity of the alternative discourse. Anastasia acknowledges that change is

needed (e.g., "...we can create ourselves") while Derek acknowledges the role of stability (e.g., "...and we'll stay steady for a while). In this example, we can see how couples embody the discursive tensions present in their responses to questions.

Similarity-difference with partner: In their interviews, participants often brought up the ways in which they were similar or different from their partner, and the ways in which those similarities/differences played a role in their relationship. The discourse markers found accompanying the similarity-difference tension were *entertaining* and *negating*.

Participants utilize the *entertaining* marker as they discuss the ways in which they navigate their communicative needs that are different from that of their partner, while acknowledging that their partner's communicative needs are also important to consider and accommodate. Aadav talks about how he and his wife navigate their differences:

So, I think... So the challenges are, we are very different people. Right? I think there's, there are a lot of issues that we, we don't see eye to eye on, and, it's okay if those issues aren't, um, aren't like life changing, right? But there are also a lot of issues that are life changing, that we disagree on. Um, which is a challenge by itself, right? Because ideally like, let's say the topic of this conversation, having kids. It needs to be something that people will align on, if you don't align on, it's, it's a nightmare because it's like, one person's gonna be super unhappy...But what has worked in a lot of these, um, lot of these kind of disagreements has been focusing on, on communicating, um, empathetically. I think that's, that's been helpful. Understanding what are the fears of the other person and then kind of working to address those fears, um, and, and just communicating, right?

In talking about how very different he and his wife are on various subjects, Aadav notes that communicating empathetically is what has worked for them. Through Aadav's inclusion of

empathetic communication, he acknowledges that he and his wife are often toward the 'difference' side of the similarity-difference tension – but that they can balance the discourse of difference with the discourse of similarity through looking at the situation from perspectives outside their own. In that acknowledgement of the importance of empathetic communication, Aadav entertains the alternative discourses that his wife holds as legitimate and equally valid to his own.

Similarly, Danica illustrates the similarity-difference tension as she considers the differences and similarities in her and her husband's style of working through conflict in their relationship:

You know, it's funny most of the time it's emotionally driven on things that we can both come to an agreement later. Like sometimes I, I'm very, like, I'm the fire person. Like, I will get really angry and mo- you know, motivated to become very, um, I just, I yell and I'm like, ah, getting really mad and everything. He's more of the person who's like, "Okay, let's look at this at a logical way. Um, you know, let's, you know, I'm here for you." So he's very supportive, sometimes more so than I ever could be and I really appreciate that about him. Um, but I think that for the most part, it, it can get, like, really gritty at first. And then, like, we, we tell ourselves, "Okay, we need to take a break." And then, or I do, I'm like, "I can't do this. I gotta take a break." And then we come back and, you know, even if we don't agree particularly on something, I'm just like, "Okay, well that's your decision and it's, you know, I'm gonna go this route." And I- and like I said, that's with very minuscule stuff because when it's a big decision [we agree].

In this excerpt, Danica balances the discursive tensions around similarity (e.g., "...when it's a big decision we agree") and difference (e.g., "...I yell and I'm like, ah, getting really mad and everything. He's more of the person who's like, 'Okay, let's look at this at a logical way'"). For Danica, the difference in argument styles is valuable because it allows for the ability to see multiple sides of the discussion: emotional and logical (e.g., "...and I really appreciate that about

him"). In Danica's recounting, she acknowledges that her partner has a different communication style in times of conflict, but that difference is not necessarily a negative difference.

The other discursive marker that accompanied the similarity-difference dialectical tension was *negating*. In their responses, participants refute the implicit sociocultural assumption that differences are inherently bad or damaging to a relationship. In John's response, he negates the assumption that all differences are damaging or that similarity is compulsory for happiness:

You know, if, if your whatever political views or, you know, ultimate goals in life or traveling, not traveling or, you know, days off. Do you want the weekends off? No. There's a bunch of different ways that, you know, you gotta be on the same page about it, but you gotta prioritize and see which ones really matter. And, but as, as Jenni calls it, "Are they deal breakers?" You know? And it [having children] wasn't a deal breaker with us because, I mean, we're at that age where we, I don't think physically we can have children, so it's really not even on the table.

In this excerpt John is balancing the discourse of similarity (e.g., "There's a bunch of different ways that, you know, you gotta be on the same page about it..") and the discourse of difference (e.g., "...it wasn't a deal breaker with us"). Through his response John highlights that he and his partner do not agree on everything, but those differences are not necessarily relationship-ending.

Manuel also discusses the ways in which his wife balances him out through difference:

Like, I mean, she just, you know, she, like, grounds me, um, with a lot of things. I, I tend to, um... I'm one of those people that, like, thinks a lot in their head about, like, a certain situation. I'm like, "You know, but what about this? But what about that?" And she, when I speak with her about it, she's very good about, like, grounding me and like, kind of like, I don't wanna say the word like absolutes, but like, it's almost like, she's like, "This is right. This is wrong." And like, I need that 'cause I'm more of a like, "Well, but I could see why this is, like, a gray area," you know?

Manuel describes the benefit of his wife viewing issues from a different lens in his response. Through this assertion that her viewpoints help him work through a situation, Manuel is *negating* the centripetal sociocultural discourse that similarity to your relational partner is ideal, which creates space to highlight the positive role of a discourse of difference in a relationship.

Revisiting the Research Question

In identifying which discourses construct a perception of relational satisfaction for nonmutual couples to answer the question, ““how, if at all, do the identified discourses construct a perception of relational satisfaction in nonmutual couples?” there were four discursive tensions found to be salient for how nonmutual couples create a feeling of relational satisfaction in their partnership. The first of these discursive tensions is autonomy-connection with participants’ families. This tension highlights the ways in which they acknowledge the discourse of connection, i.e. the need for a strong familial relationship, with a discourse of autonomy that privileges distancing their relationship from the expectations of their family. This privilege of the discourse of autonomy allows for nonmutual couples to create a relationship that works best for the dyad and maintain relational satisfaction, even if it’s not what their family expects. The second discursive tension found to be salient for this research question is openness-closedness with a partner. As participants discussed the reasons they felt that their partner was a good fit for them, each participant mentioned feeling that they could be authentically themselves around their partners. Countering an implicit expectation that current relationships must mirror experiences from past relationships, in which they had to alter their expression in some way, the discourse of openness allows for nonmutual couples to create a

sense of ease and understanding within the dyad, aiding in feelings of relational satisfaction. A third discursive tension found in relation to marital satisfaction is the stability-change dichotomy. In their responses, participants illustrated the way in which they adjust during times of change within their relationship while also looking forward to times of stability. As the participants position alternative discourses to contradict the discursive position that change in a relationship equals disruption or that stability equals stagnation, they are able to maintain feelings of relational satisfaction through times of turbulence in their relationship. Finally, a discursive tension for similarity and difference was present as participants talked about their relationships, often bringing up the ways in which they were similar or different from their partner, and the different ways in which those similarities/differences played a positive role in their relationship.

Findings for Research Question Three

Research question three asks, “in which ways do discourses of nonmutual couples reify and resist heteronormative relationship and family planning expectations?” The three salient themes that help highlight how nonmutual couples navigate heteronormative discourses are autonomy-connection with family, similarity-difference with social circle, and childfree-parenthood.

Autonomy-connection with family: This discourse, which was also salient for research question two about relational satisfaction, was apparent when participants discussed the ways in which they create distance from the expectations of their family and refute their families’ heteronormative discourses about how relationships and parenting should be conducted. To

best illustrate how utilizing feminist and queer theories as a theoretical lens allows for additional insight, let's revisit Anastasia's quote about her family:

Um, and so working through that and realizing you are your own person separate of your family has been very important, no matter how much you love them or see them. And same goes for me, right? Of, yes, there's this life path. Yes, that's what's expected, um, but I don't have to have that life path in the same way that my family designates. So it, it took us about three and a half, four years to get to that point and for me to, right? Deconstruct myself far enough away from my family to say, oh, wait, I'm not, I don't have to follow my family's expectations for this, right? I am my own adult. I can make my own choices.

Earlier in her interview, Anastasia discusses how her family's expectation was that she not have sex before marriage, get married, finish college, buy a house, and then have children. Her response to her family's "life path" expectations was to refute those expectations created for her by her family and instead create a discourse of autonomy with statements like "I am my own adult. I can make my own choices" and "I don't have to live that life path in the way that my family designates it." When considered through a theoretical lens of queer and feminist theory, Anastasia is also refuting larger cultural expectations of purity for women with those same statements. "I am my own adult. I can make my own choices" is then not only a response to her family's expectations of how she navigates her life, but also a response to the cultural pressure of her religious upbringing, including the expectation that she save herself for marriage. Through Anastasia's negation of the discourse of connection with her family, she is *also* negating the larger sociocultural pressure of purity for women.

Another example of how participants reify or resist heteronormative family planning expectations comes from Priya when she talks about the tension that existed when her parents and in-laws found out that they were pregnant but not sure if they were keeping the pregnancy:

The other pressure was like, we told our families a little too soon (laughs). And then, when we hadn't like, made that decision, whether to go through with it [the pregnancy] or not, um, I think Aadav just needed some comfort from like, his parents. And people, other people other than me, who he's close to. Um, because it's, it's a big decision. And I think when two people, like, when we both can't come to a conclusion it's like, something you wanna talk to, you know, about with other people. And the problem is like, grandparents definitely have their own emotions. And then, um, him [Aadav] being him and like, caring about other people's emotions a lot, it was difficult for him to kind of go through that, as well. Which I don't think we realized like, when we told them, 'cause again, it's like, when you share news like this, you want it to be like, a very joyous thing. And you expect it to be like, you know, you picture like, all these celebrations. Like, you know, just it, especially your first child, right. Um, so that was a big pressure. Like, just like, okay, there's the whole me feeling certain things and you feeling certain things. But now like, our families are feeling certain things.

Priya's quote illustrates the tension of the autonomy-connection discourses intertwine as she recounts their need for support from those closest to them, their parents, in a discourse of connection. Priya negates that discourse of connection by overriding it with a discourse of autonomy as she discusses how her and her husband are separate from their parents and even if their parents wanted them to keep the pregnancy, it would ultimately be up to Priya and Aadav to choose what is best for them. Priya's story also shows how she and her husband's experience did not align with the larger discourses of reproductive normality that pregnancies in married relationships should be both wanted and celebrated because it's expected that married couples will want to have children, and instead that expectation of happiness acted as an additional pressure that complicated Priya and Aadav's feelings about being pregnant. Priya explains why considering her parents' and in-laws' feelings about the desire to keep the pregnancy created added pressure: "...there's the whole me feeling certain things and you feeling certain things. But now like, our families are feeling certain things." This connection to their families caused Priya and Aadav to feel the pressure to make the pregnancy a joyous

occasion, when in reality the couple was struggling to figure out what option would be best for their relationship plans and life goals.

Both Priya and Anastasia's stories animate the struggle between discourses of connection and autonomy with families, and how that discursive struggle highlights the heteronormative and reproductive normativity discourses that surround romantic relationships. The way that Priya, Anastasia and the other participants negotiated the autonomy-connection struggle with their families is by choosing to highlight a discourse of autonomy and using that discourse of autonomy to refute their families' heteronormative prescriptions about how relationship milestones should be met or reacted to.

Similarity-Difference in relation to social circle: The similarity-difference discursive struggle was used as a key way for participants to resist heteronormative expectations about parenthood and romantic relationships. Participants acknowledge the differences of their relationships and views on parenthood as compared to those held by the people they interact with in a social setting, refuting the expectation that their relationships look similar to other relationships to be successful. When talking about how he understands his relationship in comparison to others', Derek says:

Everybody's, "Oh, my wife, the bitch this, my wife the bitch that," and I go, "Is my relationship okay if my wife's not a bitch?" (laughs). Apparently, you know, everybody has problems in their, their day to day lives. And I just, I don't understand that. So, that's a good difference. I just, so many people have what I would consider. Well, it seems like communication problems where I think where we communicate more than most people do.

Derek's example brings to light the role of the larger sociocultural discourse around sharing relationship struggles with your friends. For many individuals, discussing negative emotions

with friends or other members of one's social circle is seen as not only a way of processing those negative emotions, but also an activity in bonding (Blithe, 2014; Nils & Rimé, 2012). Because of the emotional processing and bonding that can occur when individuals vent about their relationship, there is an overarching expectation that one should join in when others are venting about *their* relational partners. By favoring a discourse of difference (e.g., "[i]s my relationship okay if my wife's not a bitch?") over a discourse of similarity (in this example, joining in and venting about his wife), Derek is also resisting the cultural expectation that is expected and normal to complain about your wife to your friend group.

Participants also resisted heteronormative family planning expectations through a similar use of the similarity-difference discourse. For example, Priya talks about how her friends planned for children while she and her husband did not:

But it, it, like meaning, we didn't r- neither of us were like, planning like, "Oh, um, this year, we should start." Like, we had some friends who were like, "Oh, the minute we get married it's like, we're gonna try for kids." It's like, they had these plans and we didn't do that. We weren't there.

In this excerpt, Priya points out the difference between her own relationship and her friends who immediately planned to have children. This excerpt highlights a larger centripetal discourse - that it is expected that newlyweds, particularly heterosexual newlyweds, very quickly transition to parents after getting married. The social discourse about having children shortly after getting married supports the even larger pronatal social discourses around the idea that the ultimate goal of relationships is to procreate. Priya not only acknowledges the discursive tension between similarity to her friends, because she is married like they are; she also negates the larger heteronormative discourse that the goal of marriage is to have children by privileging

a discourse of difference with her friends. Additionally, Priya is positing a centrifugal discourse of relationships to contrast with the centripetal heteronormative discourse - she is privileging a discourse that centers the goal of relational happiness and success over the existing discourse that privileges starting a family.

Childfree-Parenthood: Unsurprisingly, the childfree-parenting dichotomy was also salient for this research question. Individuals in nonmutual couples resisted discourses of reproductive normativity by refuting the assumption that having children is just the “obvious next step” for couples. In their responses, participants discussed the ways in which ramifications of having children both personally and for their relationship, they refuted the sociocultural expectation that having children is the natural progression for long-term heterosexual couples, and should be treated as such. Anastasia sums up the childfree-parenthood dichotomy when she talks about how the idea of having kids and the reality of having kids are very different:

Yes, we are, we're doing the things and, and the steps, but, you know, my, my timeframe has drastically changed, um, because I realized that there's a lot more that goes into children and adulting and, you know, creating the life that they would deserve than what I have right now. And so, you know, in my mind, we would've been married for two years in our, you know, or a year and a half and already trying for kids. Oh, hard pass because we, we're not in a state that I, we're able to provide them with the life that they deserve right now.

In the above quote, Anastasia highlights how even though she originally privileged the centripetal discourse of parenthood that having children is the expected next for married couples, she has now refuted that discourse. Instead, she supplies a counter-discourse that having children, and raising them in a way that they deserve, requires forethought and planning and isn't something to do just because it is expected. Anastasia not only shifts from a discourse

of parenthood to a childfree discourse, but she is also refusing to privilege the discourse of reproductive normativity pressure to have children as soon as she can after marriage.

In a unique example, John talks about his past experience with parenthood:

I always felt that way. Um, I did, I was in a relationship with a girl who did have a son. And I, I think he was like four, at the time. Um, and, you know, there was times where it was nice. But the majority of the time, I just, I didn't, didn't care for it. Just because I guess, selfishly, um, everything revolved around the kid. And like, we could never do anything. And it was frustrating to her and frustrating to both of us, so.

In sharing his experience with parenthood and his honesty about his dislike for the role, John resists the discourse of reproductive normativity that having children is natural and the benefits of having children outweigh the costs. An aspect of the centripetal parenthood discourse is that not only is it assumed that heterosexual couples will *want* to have children, but also that they should enjoy being a parent. John's example flips this discourse on its head when he actively refutes the discourse of parenthood in favor of the childfree discourse. He does acknowledge the centripetal discourse of parenthood when he utilized the word "selfish" but does not center that discourse and instead reiterates the frustration caused by being in the role of parent.

Negative Case Analysis: Heteronormativity

In addition to the contrapuntal themes identified that relate directly to the research questions, I offer some contextual findings here that help to illustrate the discourses in a deeper, richer sense. Specifically, I explore a theme that acknowledges the sense that heteronormativity is always present in couple discourses.

Nonmutual couples do not always resist the heteronormative assumptions around relationships, sometimes they do reify them. Some participants did still privilege a discourse of parenthood when they discussed how they envision being a parent. Below, Kristina highlights the central discourse of parenthood that was perpetuated – unconditional love from her children:

Um, but I could have a baby and they would have to love me. That's my baby. You know? Um, so that was kind of the thought process. Um, and, you know, TV shows at the time didn't help with that 'cause that was kind of the thing. They were like, oh. You have children and, therefore, they have to like, love you and like, you have to like... They have to be there.

In Kristina's excerpt, we see the perpetuation of the centripetal discourse of parenthood that one of the benefits of having children is that they will love you unconditionally. Unlike other examples in this section, Kristina does not refute this central discourse but instead perpetuates it as she discusses her hopes for children. This embodiment of the dominant discourse was not as common an occurrence as the resistance of heteronormative family planning discourses, but it is worth noting that individuals in nonmutual relationships did not *always* resist all facets of reproductive normativity discourses.

Revisiting the Research Question

Research question 3 asked, "in which ways do discourses of nonmutual couples reify and resist heteronormative relationship and family planning expectations?" Three salient discourses act to resist heteronormative family planning expectations for nonmutual couples. The first of which is the couples' struggle with discourses of autonomy and connection with their family.

Nonmutual couples resist heteronormative expectations by creating distance from the

expectations of their family and refuting their families' heteronormative assumptions about relationships and parenting. The similarity-difference tension is also used by nonmutual couples to resist heteronormative assumptions about family planning, particularly in relation to their social circle. Nonmutual couples acknowledge that other relationships in their social circles are different than their own, and that friends may hold different views on parenthood, but do not hold the expectation that their own relationships should look like other relationships to be successful. Finally, the childfree-parenting dichotomy was also salient for this research question. By refuting the assumption that having children is just the "obvious next step" for couples, nonmutual couples resist heteronormative family planning expectations that they are faced with.

In the following final chapter, I bring these findings into discussion with theory and extant literature to consider deeper implications and offer suggestions about where future research on this topic could be beneficial.

Chapter 4: Discussion

The goal for this study of nonmutual couples was to add to the limited amount of research regarding the communicative complexities involved in family planning. The negotiation of whether or when to start a family is a large turning point in many relationships, and this is particularly true for couples who did not enter the relationship with similar family plans. Using Relational Dialectics Theory 2.0 (Baxter, 2011) as a guiding theoretical framework, this study outlines the discourses that animate a nonmutual couple's decision to have children, how those

discourses construct—or not—a sense of relational satisfaction, and how those discourses reify and resist heteronormative family planning expectations.

I found three discursive tensions that are particularly salient for nonmutual couples as they navigate family planning decisions, the first of which is the discursive tension between autonomy and connection with nonmutual couples' imagined future children. This particular autonomy-connection dichotomy highlighted the ways that individuals in nonmutual couples entertained the many possible outcomes for connection with their future child, should they ultimately choose to have them. Participants highlighted a discourse of connection when they acknowledged that they hope that their future children will have a strong, positive relationship with them, while also entertaining a discourse of autonomy by preparing for the potential outcome that their future children, as individuals with unique personalities and individual needs, may not align with their parents' like, dislikes or goals.

The autonomy-connection tension present acted as a mechanism by which individual members of nonmutual couples could prepare for potential future outcomes should they choose to have children. As defined by Sweeny et al. (2006), preparedness is a sense of readiness to respond to uncertain outcomes, which includes not only being prepared for possible future complications if they occur, but also being prepared to make the best of opportunities when they arise. Research has shown that generally speaking, optimism is the best method for establishing preparedness because it allows a person to organize their thoughts and creates a positive mindset to take on difficulties (Carroll et al., 2006; Sweeny et al., 2006). However, sometimes shifting away from optimism best serves the goal of preparedness by directing thoughts and actions toward avoiding undesired outcomes, like not having a strong

connection with your future child. By entertaining multiple discourses of connection and autonomy with their potential future children, individuals in nonmutual relationships vacillate toward and away from optimism as they consider becoming parents.

A second discursive tension which animated nonmutual couples' family planning was openness-closedness. This dichotomy appeared as participants discussed the influence of their families' opinions about parenthood on their decision to have children. Individuals in nonmutual relationships worked to negate the negative messages they'd received from their families by replacing the discourse privileged by their family with one of their own. This negation and replacement require individuals in nonmutual relationships to examine the messages about parenthood that their own parents passed onto them on a deep, personal level – is their families' feelings about parenthood truly how they feel, or just what they grew up hearing? Alternatively, do their families' methods of raising children encourage or deter individuals in nonmutual relationships to consider having children? Participant responses indicate that they feel a pull between appreciation for their families' decision to be open and share information about raising children and wishing that their parents had shared less about the negative aspects of parenthood. Family openness about parenting difficulties influenced individuals in nonmutual relationships to consider not only the positive aspects of parenthood, but also the negative facets of parenthood, in some cases making parenthood become altogether undesirable.

The third, and novel, discursive tension was found when investigating discourses that animate nonmutual couples' family planning, and that is the childfree-parenthood dichotomy. This tension reflected the pull that respondents felt between the benefits provided by their

childfree lives and the potential, and yet unknown, benefits/drawback enmeshed with becoming parents. For nonmutual couples, the decision to have children heavily considers larger cultural discourses around parenthood that widely range in emotional valence. In everyday conversations, we are exposed to highly positive discourses about parenthood such as “children bring light and laughter wherever they go” or “you don’t know unconditional love until you’ve had a child,” yet simultaneously exposed to discourses that are much more negative in nature, like “parenting is the hardest thing I’ve ever done” and “get your sleep now, you won’t be able to when you have kids.” The childfree-parenthood dichotomy closely mirrors these larger cultural discourses that we are all exposed to regarding parenthood. This discursive tension is highlighted as nonmutual couples talk about the need to examine the benefits that a childfree lifestyle affords them, and critically explore the ways that those aspects of their lifestyle would change when or if they become parents. This tension was present for *all* the participants interviewed, and unlike the other dialectical tensions found, all three discursive markers were used by participants as they interacted with the childfree-parenthood dichotomy.

Digging deeper into the functions of the discourses provided by the couples in this study, participants largely used *entertaining* to acknowledge that their partners may view the childfree-parenthood tension through a different lens than they do. This entertaining of multiple discourses about parenthood seemed to interplay with how individuals in nonmutual dyads interact with their presupposed views about becoming parents. Specifically, when talking about how their views of parenthood have changed over time, individuals in nonmutual couples would counter their past beliefs about becoming a parent – individuals who identified as early-articulators would counter their own negative opinions about parenthood with the

positive opinions that their partner holds, and vice versa. Because individuals in nonmutual couples need to entertain multiple discourses about parenthood, they are better able to counter their own previous reasoning for or against parenthood. The *entertaining* and *countering* interactions with the childfree-parenthood discourse allowed individuals in nonmutual couples to navigate the overarching discourses of heteronormativity and reproductive normativity in which reproduction is encouraged and regarded as normal, natural and ideal. Nonmutual couples' *entertaining* and *countering* of the multiple discourses surrounding parenthood illuminates the complexities that come with the decision of whether to have a child when couples are not automatically on the same page. The combined use of the *entertaining* and *countering* markers actually work to negate the cultural assumptions of parenthood as expected.

Nonmutual couples' interactions with certain discourses also aided in their construction of relational satisfaction. One of the salient discourses for relational satisfaction is autonomy-connection with participants' families, in which nonmutual couples acknowledge the discourse of connection and the desire for a positive or secure familial relationship, with a discourse of autonomy and distancing their relationship from the expectations of their family. Alignment with a discourse of autonomy allows nonmutual couples to create a sense of self and a relationship that works best for the dyad, even if it's not what their family expects. This dialectical tension aligns well with research on intergenerational ambivalence, which is defined as the simultaneous existence of both positive and negative dimensions of a parent-child relationship (Birditt, Fingerman & Zarit, 2010; Reczek, 2016). Intergenerational ambivalence is highlighted as nonmutual couples simultaneously acknowledge the positives of being close to

their family, while also struggling with the pressure that having a close or involved family can add to their relationship. Framing the concept of intergenerational ambivalence with relational satisfaction emphasizes the autonomy-connection struggle as nonmutual couples remove their understanding of successful relationships from the definition provided to them by their families, either through set expectations or relationship modeling. Most participants discussed both the positive and negative aspects of romantic relationships they learned from their parents, choosing to focus on the ways that autonomy discourse aids them in recognizing their freedom to change problematic patterns or expectations while connection discourse allows them to institute beneficial aspects of their parents' beliefs on relationships into their own. This aligns with past research (e.g., Karnilowicz et al., 2019; Mebane & Pezzuti, 2020) regarding how parental relational beliefs and/or discourses connect to their children's family practices and beliefs.

Openness-closedness with their partner was another frequent discursive struggle that directly correlated to a nonmutual couples' sense of relational satisfaction. In discussing the reasons they felt that their partner was a good fit for them, nonmutual couples expressed that they could be authentically themselves around their partners. This discourse of openness counters an unspoken expectation that current relationships may largely mirror experiences from past relationships in which they had to alter their expression in some way. By aligning with the discourse of openness and authenticity in their relationship, nonmutual couples can generate a site of non-judgmental understanding within the relationship. Wang (2016) found that balanced authenticity predicts a sense of well-being in relationships and their findings are supported here, where nonmutual couples emphasize the role of openness and authenticity in

their feelings of relational satisfaction. Ultimately, expressing oneself in a way that feels authentic and true is important for building a sense of relational satisfaction for nonmutual couples, particularly when a partner may be the only person who knows one's multifaceted reasons for wanting children or not. This observation also adds a richness to previous research about couple understandings for wanting or not wanting children (e.g., Blackstone & Stewart, 2012, 2016; Matthews & Desjardins 2017; Park, 2002, 2005).

The stability-change dichotomy also acted as a mechanism by which nonmutual couples constructed a sense of relational satisfaction through perceiving both times of change and times of stability as beneficial to their relationship. As supported by the relational turbulence model, nonmutual couples used times of turbulence or change as opportunities to generate a discourse of dyadic growth by promoting discourses of change as positive instead of negative as they navigated times of relational change (Knobloch, 2015; see also Knobloch & Thiess, 2010). The centering of a positively valenced discourse of change in nonmutual couples allows the couple to maintain feelings of relational satisfaction even through times of turbulence in their relationship. Alternatively, when necessary, nonmutual couples were able to center a discourse of stability as positive over change. This entertainment and use of both stability and change discourses allows nonmutual couples to maintain a sense of satisfaction in their relationships – whether they are finding satisfaction in the same routine after work each night or while experiencing large life upheaval.

Finally, a discursive tension for similarity and difference was present as participants talked about their satisfaction in their relationships, often bringing up the ways in which they

were similar or different from their partner and the ways in which those similarities/differences ultimately played a positive role in their relationship. In their study on ecosystem motivation in relationships, Crocker et al. (2017) found that individuals who possess ecosystem motivation, i.e., motivation that promotes other-interest behavior, posit that those individuals' relationships work in nonzero-sum ways, meaning that in times of relational conflict one partner's gain or loss will not necessarily result in the other partners' loss or gain. Essentially, relational conflict is not viewed as a scenario that must always end in a win-lose situation – the option for a win-win outcome is seen as always possible. Nonzero-sum beliefs uniquely predict increased relationship quality through increased optimism that relationship problems can be overcome (Crocker et al., 2017). Nonmutual couples often showed nonzero-sum beliefs as they talked about the ways in which they are similar and different from their partners. This was particularly evident when nonmutual couples walked the interviewer through how they resolve conflicts that arise from their differences, as they would often describe differences in beliefs, decision making processes or communications styles as a positive and balancing aspect of their relationship. In this study, framing the discourse of difference as important and beneficial to one's relationship is one of the main ways that nonmutual couples were able to express a sense of relational satisfaction, even in the face of disagreement on a subject as large as family planning. By operating with an ecosystem motivation and aligning with a discourse of difference, nonmutual couples can buoy their relationship against the centripetal discourse of similarity as a goal of romantic relationship satisfaction.

The final research question for this study examined the ways in which nonmutual couples reified or resisted heterosexual relationship and family planning expectations. Results

highlighted the different ways in which nonmutual couples navigated prevalent pronatal and relational normativity discourses they encounter. The most ubiquitous discourses discussed by nonmutual couples in relation to external pressures of normativity were autonomy-connection with family, similarity-difference with social circle, and the childfree-parenthood dichotomy. The salient discourse tensions were particularly prevalent when participants referenced issues around normative family life cycle assumptions (Hintz & Brown, 2020). The normative family lifecycle purports that choosing to be childfree violates social norms about reproduction that define adulthood and progresses from the addition of children through the empty nesting phase. Many normalized expectations are embedded in this family life cycle, “including heterosexuality, partners being of similar ages, entering a relationship in their mid-to-late 20s, having children quickly after the onset of the relationship, the births of children being spaced several years apart, and the relationship being lifelong” (Hintz & Brown, 2020; see also Gillespie, 2000; Monte, 1989). A normative family lifecycle prescribes the steps that need to be completed for couples to be deemed successful in a pronatal culture. Although not named as such by the participants, all the nonmutual couples mention the external pressures they feel to align with that lifecycle, even when they know it is not what they want for themselves. Specifically, we saw this interaction as participants discussed balancing autonomy and connection with their family because while they would prefer to stay connected to their families, there is a need to be able to resist heteronormative expectations placed upon them by their parents through the creation of distance between their relationship and the expectations of their family, simultaneously refuting their families’ discourses of reproductive normativity. This privileging of a discourse of autonomy allows nonmutual couples the metaphorical space to

create a relational, and potentially familial, dynamic that does not center reproductive normativity or the normative family lifecycle.

Where autonomy-connection was prevalent as nonmutual couples discussed relationship with their families, similarity-difference was the dominant dichotomy present in relation to their social circle. The nonmutual couples in this study acknowledged that other relationships in their social circles were different than their own and that the people they interact with socially may hold different views on parenthood. Ultimately, nonmutual couples privileged a discourse of difference in relation to their social circle, which acted to minimize the expectation that their own relationships should look like other relationships to be successful. Not surprisingly, discourses of relational and reproductive normativity were commonly brought up and acted as sites where nonmutual couples privileged a discourse of difference from those in their life. Nonmutual couples' alignment with a discourse of difference from normative assumptions made by their social circles acts similarly to their alignment with a discourse of autonomy from their families' expectations - the discourse of difference generates space for the nonmutual couple to legitimize their own unique relational and family lifecycle even if it does not match what they see around them.

Nonmutual couples also refute discourses of parenthood, which are embedded in larger reproductive normativity discourses, as natural, normal, and expected by privileging a discourse of being childfree. This alignment with a childfree discourse is particularly notable as nonmutual couples discussed the heavy consideration of the changes children will bring to their relationships and life goals. By voicing their concerns about parenthood, or acknowledging their

partners' concerns as legitimate, individuals in nonmutual couples took the unspoken centripetal discourse of parenthood and brought it to the surface to be examined critically. Through their critical examination of parenthood and reproductive normativity discourse, nonmutual couples are better able to deconstruct the underlying expectations that heterosexual couples should automatically fall into a normative family lifecycle. Nonmutual couples highlighting the childfree-parenthood dichotomy for the sake of challenging the assumption that successful heterosexual relationships are predicated upon following normative reproductive expectations allows nonmutual couples work to legitimize their relationship without further embodying those normative expectations.

While nonmutual couples actively refute many expectations embedded within discourses of heterosexuality and reproductive normality in relationships, it is worth noting that there was very little mention by this study's early articulator participants of feelings of *personal* failure on their part for not wanting to have children while their partner did. Given the research conducted around stigma and voluntarily childlessness, it is somewhat unexpected that the participants did not discuss feeling as though society or their partner viewed them as less loving, more immature, or more emotionally unstable for not desiring children (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017; Ekelund & Ask, 2021; Gillespie, 2003).

Previous research done has uncovered ways in which existing in a pronatalist society causes stigma to childfree individuals (Ekelund & Ask, 2021; Hintz & Brown, 2020). Considering the stigma that individuals face for their choice to be childfree, it was expected that the participants in this study would discuss how social pronatalist stigma affected their feelings

about themselves as a partner and on being childfree generally. The lack of impact from social stigma may be an indication that early articulator individuals in nonmutual couples are better able to combat stigma through their relationship in some way; however, it seems most plausible that themes of internalized pronatalist stigmas may arise with a larger, more diverse sample. In this study, the early articulators in each relationship were men. Given that most of the studies were conducted to examine the stigma surrounding childfree *women*, it would make sense that the internalization and rejection of stigma found for those studies would not appear as prevalently in this study, where men were the early articulators. Not surprisingly, the way that choosing to be childfree is viewed is highly gendered – men’s reasons for being childfree are often seen as practical, whereas women’s are often considered selfish (Gillespie, 2003; Park, 2005; Weston & Qu, 2001). To best account for the role of social stigma in how nonmutual couples navigate family planning, future studies on nonmutual couples would benefit from ensuring that there is a representative sample of early articulator women in the study to help combat the presence of gender bias of childfree individuals.

Although this study presents a novel look into the ways that nonmutual couples navigate family planning and supplies an original dialogic tension of childfree-parenthood with which to examine decision making about parenthood, there are limitations. First, this study utilized a small sample size of only 5 couples. To further support the findings in this study it would be beneficial to run a larger study with more interviews. Second, and relatedly, the sample for this study was largely homogeneous. While the age dispersion was relatively large for this sample, with participant ages ranging from mid-twenties to early sixties, most respondents were white, heterosexual, middle class and had been in their current relationship for many years. A more

diverse sample of participants would greatly benefit any future study on nonmutual couples, as the importance of decentering white, heterosexual, and middle-class voices is integral to fully understanding the multitude of different ways in which couples engage with interpersonal and cultural discourses around family planning and the ways that positionality affects the discourses present. In the sample, nine of the ten couples interviewed had been in their relationship since their late teens; an area of future study would be to examine the differences in discourses present for family planning in couples who had been together since they were young against the discourses present for couples who met later in life.

Third, although this study was exploratory in nature and benefited from the wide variety of dialogic tensions found during analysis, future RDT-based studies with nonmutual couples would benefit from narrowing the scope of analysis to fewer dialogic tensions to analyze in greater depth the interplay of the tensions with each other. Finally, because this study interviewed only nonmutual couples that are currently in a relationship, there is an inherent sampling bias. In future studies it may be beneficial to include individuals in the study sample who have had past relationships that were nonmutual regarding family planning to alleviate the potential for overreporting the communicative practices of *successful* nonmutual couples as opposed to nonmutual couples generally. Despite these limitations, this study has produced unique theoretical insights by proposing a new dialectical tension found in relationships, childfree-parenthood, and linking that dialectic to other, existing dialectics. Additionally, this study reinforced the potential for connecting critical discourse and content analyses and offered future directions to strengthen the study of discursive interaction using RDT for nonmutual couples.

I also note how this study contributes to expanding notions of heteronormativity beyond seemingly queer aspects of family. Certainly, the couples in this study all identified as heterosexual and, even without children, their sexual attraction to each other would likely not be questioned. At the same time, institutional norms related to heterosexuality—especially as it relates to families—often demand that nontraditional family structures be officially recognized as families when children are involved (Manning, 2020). In a sense, the choice to be childfree—or even the proximal discourses between partners regarding potentially being childfree—help to free outwardly appearing heterosexual relationships from one of the demands of heterosexuality. Simply, the choice not to have a child, on some level, queers expectations of interpersonal romantic relationships (see Manning & Adams, 2022). Although being childfree does not make a couple/family queer, it still queers the notion of what family can be. Future research exploring non-normative aspects of families should continue to consider how non-normativity and queerness relate.

Overall, this study examined discursive tensions present in various aspects of nonmutual voluntary childless relationships and shines light on the unique ways in which nonmutual couples navigate those discourses as they pertain to family planning. Through their *entertaining*, *countering*, or *negating* of multiple discourses, nonmutual couples can navigate family planning while existing within a pronatalist society and maintaining a sense of relational satisfaction. Insights learned from examining the interplay of discursive tensions present in nonmutual couples' relationships could inform family and relational therapy providers to be aware of and aid couples experiencing distress as they navigate family planning. Finally, this study aids in

expanding the literature available on understanding relationships, especially relationships seen as “nontraditional,” as socially constructed and discursively shaped.

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Appendix A

FAMILY PLANNING AND RELATIONAL SATISFACTION INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Hi there, welcome! To start, I'd like to thank you for agreeing to do this interview with me. Navigating the decision to have children is one that most long-term, committed couples experience, and one that many have a tough time with. It means a lot to me that you are participating in this project, and I hope that what we learn can be helpful to other couples who are experiencing difficulties, and family counselors who help them, in navigating the decision of whether or when to have children together.

Before we get going, I want to check that you understood everything on the informed consent document. Do you have any questions about anything on the document?

(Answer any questions.)

Additionally, I want to let you know that this video call is being recorded. I would like to remind you that nothing that I get from this interview is more important than your well-being, comfort, and safety. If you feel like this interview is taking you to an emotional space where you do not want to be, please just let me know and we will stop right away. Does that sound okay?

(Wait for response.)

Great! I'm turning on the recording now. Now that we've gone over the nuts and bolts, let's move into the interview. And, please remember, everything that you tell me will be shared with my thesis advisor, who will be guiding me in this study—I just want you to know that he will hear this recording, okay?

(Wait for affirmation.)

Perfect. So, this interview involves me learning more about how couples decide whether or not to have children. Specifically, I want to know how you and your partner came to the decision about having children that you did. To do that, we will start with some broad questions

about your relationship. Then, we'll have a second set of questions where we will cover your feelings about parenthood, and discussions you've had with your partner about having children.

SECTION 1: REFLEXIVE RELATIONSHIP QUESTIONS

(GOAL: Inform RQ2 and RQ3 through finding how the interviewee views/describes: 1) positives/negatives in current relationship; and 2) their relationship in comparison to past/outside relationship modeling)

Before we really get going, I want to know about your relationship. An easy one, to start:

1. Tell me about your current relationship—what is the Story of [Name] & [Name]? (RQ2)
 - a. *How/when did you meet?*
 - b. *What drew you to your partner? Do you still feel that now?*
 - c. *What kind of person is your partner? How would you describe them in 3 words?*
 - d. *Things about your relationship you'd change?*
 - e. *Tone of relationship? Silly, serious, etc.*
 - f. *What do disagreements look like?*
 - g. *Favorite story about your relationship/partner*
 - h. *Surprising challenges/successes as a couple?*
 - i. *Has there been any significant event that has changed your relationship? What was the event? How did it change your relationship?*

2. How does this relationship compare to others that you've had? (RQ2/RQ3)
 - a. *Probe for examples of similarities/differences*
 - b. *You mention... Can you elaborate?*
 - c. *What do you think makes this relationship different/the same?*
 - d. *Patterns? Probe if notice.*

3. How does your relationship look different to your friends' relationships? (RQ2/RQ3)
 - a. *Parents' relationships? Siblings'?*
 - b. *Model relationship off others' relationships?*
 - c. *Relationships you do not want yours to be like?*

SECTION 2: SATISFACTION/HAPPINESS QUESTIONS & EXERCISES

(GOAL: Inform RQ2 through examining similarities/differences of described relational happiness/satisfaction and results of RAS and relational satisfaction graph)

For this section of the interview, we're going to get a sense of how you're feeling in your relationship. For the first few questions, we're going to dive into relational satisfaction and happiness. Those terms may seem similar, but relational happiness is more about a current emotion whereas satisfaction is less immediate and more long-term. Relational happiness is when you feel contentment or pleasure *right now* when thinking or talking about your relationship. Relational satisfaction is how you feel about your relationship *generally* in an overall, longevity sense—looking at the entirety of your relationship do you feel fulfilled or do you feel something is missing? Does that distinction make sense?

(Wait confirmation of understanding.)

Okay, keeping those definitions in mind:

1. Would you describe yourself as currently happy in your relationship? Why? (RQ2)
 - a. *How do you define moments of happiness in your relationship? What do those look like?*
 - b. *What does relational happiness feel like for you?*
 - c. *When are times when you felt more happy? Less?*
 - d. *What can your partner do that will affect your happiness the most?*

2. Would you describe yourself as satisfied in your relationship? Why? (RQ2)
 - a. *When you look back over your entire relationship, how do you describe it?*
 - b. *Have you ever been through a time when you felt a void in your relationship that needed to be filled by someone or something other than your partner?*
 - c. *Do you feel fulfilled by your relationship, or does something feel as though it's missing? When are those feelings the strongest? Do they fluctuate?*

3. You completed the Couples Satisfaction Index before this interview. Let's go through your responses, can you share with me some details?

SECTION 3: PARENTHOOD QUESTIONS

(GOAL: To support RQ1 by having interviewees share 1) their personal feelings toward parenthood; 2) how they frame their partner's feelings toward parenthood; and 3) how they communicate those feelings to their partner. Secondary goal is to answer RQ3 by noting how participants discuss parenthood expectations.)

Okay, we're now going to move on to the section on your feelings about parenthood. I'm going to start us off with a broad question:

1. What are your overall thoughts and feelings about having children and of being a parent? (RQ1/RQ3)
 - a. *Did you always feel this way? How have your views or feelings changed over time?*
 - b. *What events or discussions reinforce these feelings?*
 - c. *Can you recall any experiences that have shaped your feelings in this? Can you describe them?*
 - d. *What kinds of pressures have you felt in response to these feelings?*
 - e. *Have you ever felt unsure about your feelings about parenthood? When does that happen?*

Thank you for sharing! Do you have anything else you would like to add regarding your personal feelings about having children?

(Allow for an answer, if any.)

Next, I have some questions that will ask you to consider how you and your partner came to the decision on whether or not to have children, and where you each stand on the idea of being a parent. The first question is:

1. Do you think it's necessary for partners to have similar views on parenthood for the relationship to be successful? Why? (RQ1)
 - a. *Which person in the relationship feels more strongly about parenthood, you or your partner? Are they positive? Negative? How can you tell?*
 - b. *What do you think are the main reasons that your partner feels the way they do about parenthood? How can you tell?*
 - c. *How often do you discuss family planning with your partner? Take me through one of those discussions.*
 - d. *Who first discussed family planning in your relationship? What did that conversation look like?*

2. Why do you think your partner holds the views they do about parenthood?
 - a. *Have you ever asked them directly? If yes, how did they respond? If no, why not?*
 - b. *What is your opinion of your partner's rationale?*
 - c. *How do you feel their rationale is similar/different from yours?*

3. How has your partner influenced your views on parenthood? (RQ1)

4. How do you think you have influenced your partner's views? (RQ1)
 - a. *Do you think your partner has ever struggled with your views on parenthood? What have they done or said to make you think that?*
 - b. *Have you ever struggled with your partner's views? Why?*
 - c. *In what ways do you feel having children would impact you and your partner's relationship?*
 - d. *As parents, what do you feel you would be gaining or giving up as a couple?*

5. What is your biggest hope or fear when thinking about being a parent? Your partner's? (RQ1/RQ3)
 - a. *Have you shared this with your partner? How did they respond?*

b. *How do you relate to your own parents with your views of parenthood? Are they similar? Different?*

Great, thank you! We've now finished all the sections of the interview, but before we conclude, do you have anything else you would like to add about how you and your partner decided to not/have children?

(Wait for response.)

That's it! We've gotten through everything I had planned for this interview. Thank you so much for participating. I really appreciate it! Do you have any last questions for me?

(Answer as necessary.)

Alright, now we will officially end the interview! The recording will stop as soon as I end the video call. Thanks so much again for your participation! Please stay safe and well. Bye now.

(End the video call.)

Appendix B

COUPLES SATISFACTION INDEX (CSI-32)

Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship.

Extremely Unhappy 0	Fairly Unhappy 1	A Little Unhappy 2	Happy 3	Very Happy 4	Extremely Happy 5	Perfect 6
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Most people have disagreements in their relationships. Please indicate below the approximate extent of agreement or disagreement between you and your partner for each item on the following list.

	Always Agree	Almost Always Agree	Occa- sionally Disagree	Fre- quently Disagree	Almost Always Disagree	Always Disagree
Amount of time spent together	5	4	3	2	1	0
Making major decisions	5	4	3	2	1	0
Demonstrations of affection	5	4	3	2	1	0

	All the time	Most of the time	More often than not	Occa- sionally	Rarely	Never
In general, how often do you think that things between you and your partner are going well?	5	4	3	2	1	0
How often do you wish you hadn't gotten into this relationship?	0	1	2	3	4	5

	Not at all TRUE	A little TRUE	Some- what TRUE	Mostly TRUE	Almost Completely TRUE	Completely TRUE
I still feel a strong connection with my partner	0	1	2	3	4	5
If I had my life to live over, I would marry (or live with / date) the same person	0	1	2	3	4	5
Our relationship is strong	0	1	2	3	4	5
I sometimes wonder if there is someone else out there for me	5	4	3	2	1	0
My relationship with my partner makes me happy	0	1	2	3	4	5
I have a warm and comfortable relationship with my partner	0	1	2	3	4	5
I can't imagine ending my relationship with my partner	0	1	2	3	4	5
I feel that I can confide in my partner about virtually anything	0	1	2	3	4	5
I have had second thoughts about this relationship recently	5	4	3	2	1	0
For me, my partner is the perfect romantic partner	0	1	2	3	4	5
I really feel like part of a team with my partner	0	1	2	3	4	5
I cannot imagine another person making me as happy as my partner does	0	1	2	3	4	5

	Not at all	A little	Some- what	Mostly	Almost Completely	Completely
How rewarding is your relationship with your partner?	0	1	2	3	4	5
How well does your partner meet your needs?	0	1	2	3	4	5
To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?	0	1	2	3	4	5
In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?	0	1	2	3	4	5

How good is your relationship compared to most? Worse than all others
(Extremely bad) 0 1 2 3 4 5 Better than all others
(Extremely good)

	Never	Less than once a month	Once or twice a month	Once or twice a week	Once a day	More often
Do you enjoy your partner's company?	0	1	2	3	4	5
How often do you and your partner have fun together?	0	1	2	3	4	5

For each of the following items, select the answer that best describes *how you feel about your relationship*. Base your responses on your first impressions and immediate feelings about the item.

INTERESTING	5	4	3	2	1	0	BORING
BAD	0	1	2	3	4	5	GOOD
FULL	5	4	3	2	1	0	EMPTY
LONELY	0	1	2	3	4	5	FRIENDLY
STURDY	5	4	3	2	1	0	FRAGILE
DISCOURAGING	0	1	2	3	4	5	HOPEFUL
ENJOYABLE	5	4	3	2	1	0	MISERABLE

PERMISSION FOR USE: We developed the CSI scales to be freely available for research and clinical use. No further permission is required beyond this form and the authors will not generate study-specific permission letters.

SCORING: To score the CSI-32, you simply sum the responses across all of the items. The point values of each response of each item are shown above. **NOTE** – When we present the scale to participants, we do not show them those point values. We just give them circles to fill in (on pen-and-paper versions) or radio buttons to click (in online surveys) in place of those point values.

INTERPRETATION: CSI-32 scores can range from 0 to 161. Higher scores indicate higher levels of relationship satisfaction. CSI-32 scores falling below 104.5 suggest notable relationship dissatisfaction.