

**UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY**

**Rethinking reproductive decision-making: an exploration of couples' accounts**

**by**

**Shelley Pacholok**

**A THESIS**

**SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES**

**IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE**

**DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS**

**DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY**

**CALGARY, ALBERTA**

**AUGUST, 2001**

**© Shelley Pacholok 2001**



**National Library  
of Canada**

**Acquisitions and  
Bibliographic Services**

**395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada**

**Bibliothèque nationale  
du Canada**

**Acquisitions et  
services bibliographiques**

**395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada**

*Your file Votre référence*

*Our file Notre référence*

**The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.**

**The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.**

**L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.**

**L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.**

**0-612-65048-0**

**Canada**

## **Abstract**

**Only since the advent of reliable methods of birth control have couples had the ability to prevent or delay conception. As a result, couples are faced with decisions such as whether and/or when to have children. This thesis explores the reproductive decision-making process that cohabiting couples engage in when trying to resolve these issues. In order to investigate this decision-making process in-depth qualitative interviews with 28 participants (14 couples), both with and without children, were conducted. The findings suggest that what are often framed as “decisions” are in fact much more fluid than the term suggests. In addition, the kinds of issues couples considered when trying to reach a decision about children pointed to traditional assumptions about family life. Finally, the couples’ accounts revealed that it was mainly women who led the decision-making process, however not always in the direction expected. The thesis also contains reflections on the implications of these findings and suggestions for future research.**

## **Acknowledgements**

During the course of this project I have received a tremendous amount of support from my family, friends, and colleagues. Had I been less fortunate the completion of this thesis would have been much more difficult. First, I would like to thank Trevor who has always encouraged me to pursue my goals even when it means making considerable sacrifices on his part. Thank you for your support, patience, and love. I would also like to thank my family and friends who always found the time to listen and provide words of encouragement. I am also grateful to my supervisor, Gillian, for her wisdom, guidance, and assistance through all the steps of this research project. Thank you for giving me the freedom to make this project my own. Finally, I am indebted to the research participants who were willing to volunteer their time and share their thoughts on this personal topic.

## Table of Contents

Approval page.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
 CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	 1
Family decision-making.....	3
<i>Resource/Power Theory</i> .....	4
<i>Alternatives to the resource/power perspective</i> .....	6
<i>Gender relations</i> .....	8
<i>Families and other social institutions</i> .....	9
<i>Diversity in families</i> .....	9
Reproductive decision-making.....	11
 CHAPTER TWO: METHODS.....	 14
Sampling.....	14
Data collection.....	18
<i>Method</i> .....	19
<i>Methodological issues—researching couples</i> .....	20
<i>Perspectives on interview data</i> .....	22
<i>The interviews</i> .....	25
Data analysis and interpretation.....	29
Issues of quality in qualitative research.....	32
<i>Approaches to quality utilized in this study</i> .....	35
 CHAPTER THREE: THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS.....	 39
Individual accounts of “couple” behaviour.....	39
<i>Shaun’s and Cindy’s story</i> .....	45
Decision-making dynamics.....	48
<i>Whether to have children</i> .....	49
<i>When to have children</i> .....	54
The decision-making dance.....	56
<i>Leaders and followers</i> .....	56
<i>Persuasion and resistance strategies</i> .....	63
Implications of the decision-making dance.....	66

Gender and the decision-making dance.....	69
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: DECISION-MAKING OUTCOMES.....</b>	<b>72</b>
The “decision” making continuum.....	72
Outcomes of the decision-making process.....	73
<i>Final and permanent decisions</i> .....	74
<i>The “non-decision” decision</i> .....	76
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: EXPECTATIONS FOR PARENTHOOD AND REPRODUCTIVE DECISIONS.....</b>	<b>90</b>
Career interruptions and financial concerns.....	91
<i>Planning to have children: optimism and accommodation</i> .....	94
<i>Not planning to have children: resignation and resistance</i> .....	98
Discourse and ideological codes.....	102
<i>SNAF – The “standard North American family”</i> .....	103
<i>Doing SNAF—couples with children</i> .....	104
<i>SNAF and social class</i> .....	107
Institutional constraints.....	109
<b>CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>112</b>
Reproductive decision-making in context.....	113
Contributions of the research.....	122
Limitations of the research.....	124
Suggestions for future research.....	125
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>128</b>
<b>APPENDIX A: Consent for interview.....</b>	<b>135</b>
<b>APPENDIX B: Thematic Interview: Participants without children (not planning)...</b>	<b>137</b>
<b>APPENDIX C: Thematic Interview: Participants without children (planning children).....</b>	<b>138</b>
<b>APPENDIX D: Thematic Interview: Participants with children.....</b>	<b>139</b>

## Chapter One: Introduction

No, we never thought about it...[birth control] at all. If you got that way you got that way....(These are the words of Mrs. Beatrice Vincent, who was a prairie woman at the turn of the century, cited in "A Harvest Yet to Reap, A History of Prairie Women," edited by Rasmussen et al. 1976).

As the words of this prairie woman illustrate, in years past the notion of contraception was for many unthinkable. Barring physical difficulties, women who married by and large bore children. A lack of reliable and affordable methods of birth control meant that it was not necessary for couples to "decide" whether or when to have children. Rather having children was simply the default position. Those who did attempt to control their fertility were largely dependent upon the use of folk remedies to prevent unwanted pregnancies. Following is a personal letter from a daughter to her mother with a "recipe" for birth control:

So you wanted some [birth control] information. Well, I can tell you several different methods. I have the real recipe of that cocoa butter....A friend's...sister...got from her doctor after she'd had four. He charged her \$50 for it, but since, she's given it to dozens and it works. It's just 1 lb. cocoa butter and 1 oz. of common boric acid and 1 ½...oz. of Tannic Acid. It's a powder like boric acid only yellowish. You put the three in a sauce pan over hot water and the cocoa butter will melt. Then stir it all together and pour ½ inch thick in a pie-pan and cool. When cool cut in ½ inch squares like fudge. It smells good enough to eat. Then before each time put one of those pieces up there and it will melt at body heat in a minute or so. Cocoa butter alone is a preventative and so is tannic acid and these absolutely won't harm. I have my own doctor's word for that (undated, unsigned typescript from the same source as above)

However, over the last 30 years, major technological advances have occurred in the area of human reproduction. Reproductive technologies that facilitate conception, such as in-vitro fertilization and artificial insemination, have generated a great deal of

debate and an abundance of literature (Eichler 1996). For example, the report produced by the Royal Commission on New Reproductive Technologies (1993) focused entirely on technologies that aid conception. But in addition to facilitating conception, reproductive technologies also enable women to prevent or delay conception. Access to contraceptives has allowed many women in western nations to exert greater control over their fertility, in terms of whether, when, and in what context they have children (Gillespie 2000). According to the web site of Childbirth by Choice Trust, an organization that summarizes basic statistics on women of reproductive age in Canada, 76% of Canadian women of child bearing age (ages 15-44) use some form of contraception (CBC Trust 2001). The Canadian Contraceptive Study, the only source of national data on Canadian women's contraceptive behaviours in the late 1990s (Pentick and Johnson 1999), found that 59% of women who had sexual intercourse during the past six months reported that they and their partner had always used a method of contraception (Boroditsky, Fisher and Sand 1999). It is important to note that seven percent of the women who participated in the survey were pregnant or trying to conceive so they would not have been using birth control. This may be why the percentage of contraceptive users is lower than that quoted by CBC Trust. In any case it appears that a large majority of Canadian women control their fertility through the use of contraception. Information on heterosexual males' contraceptive use is difficult to find. However, I am working on the assumption that, other than a permanent method such as a vasectomy, often men are not responsible for birth control.

Despite the widespread use of birth control, the preventative aspect of reproduction has been remarkably understudied. Specifically, the ability to prevent



pregnancy and the implications that this has for the dynamics of intimate relationships has been largely overlooked. Perhaps this is because only with the advent of reliable methods of birth control, and their legalization, have couples had what can be termed a “choice” — not only regarding when and how many children they will have, but if they will have children at all. These alternatives, and the decision-making process they necessarily generate, are entirely new, yet fundamental elements of contemporary heterosexual relationships. Children are no longer a given. Rather the ability to regulate fertility requires that one take action in order to have a child, namely, ceasing to use contraception. As a result having children no longer occurs by default. Instead, for couples who use birth control, if no action is taken they will remain *childless* by default.

In order to arrive at a better understanding of this element of contemporary family life that so many couples today must address I conducted a study of couples faced with the decision of whether and/or when to have children. In an effort to better understand reproductive decision-making I spoke to cohabiting couples both with and without children. I studied the decision-making process that these couples engaged in as they confronted, negotiated, and attempted to decide amongst alternatives surrounding parenthood.

### **Family decision-making**

Reproductive decisions are only one of the many kinds of decisions made in families. It is worth examining the research on the broader area of family decision-making in order to see what we can learn about decision-making in general. In addition,

the dynamics of family decision-making may provide useful insights into the ways that couples make reproductive decisions.

The dynamics of decision-making in families have been studied extensively by sociologists. Important revisions have been made to the early models first proposed by pioneers in the field. In addition, corresponding shifts have occurred in feminist theorizing on families. These shifts are used to highlight and organize developments related to decision-making in families. I review several existing theoretical models of family decision-making as well as the empirical work that has been done in this area.

Before proceeding, however, it is necessary to note that much of the material examines decision-making between marital or common-law partners. Some, but not all, of the literature includes couples with children; some couples are married while others are not. The dilemma becomes what to include as “family” decision-making. The concept of “the family” is problematic as contemporary families are characterized by a wide variety of kinship, sexual, and household arrangements. Therefore, for the purposes of this literature review both common law, married, and same-sex couples, with and without children are considered to be families.

### *Resource/Power Theory*

One of the earliest and most widely cited studies on marital decision-making was undertaken by Blood and Wolfe in 1960 (Eichler 1981). Blood and Wolfe constructed mean power scores based on participants’ responses to eight questions. For example, respondents were asked who made the final decision on purchasing a car, deciding where to go on vacation, how much to spend on food per month and so on (Blood and Wolfe

1960 cited in Godwin and Scanzoni 1989). Different types of power relations were then identified and used to describe the family power structure.

Blood and Wolfe (1960 cited in Mizan 1994:85) explained differences in power scores between spouses using the “resources theory of marital power.” According to this perspective, resources such as income, education, and occupational status provided power in spousal decision-making. The partner with the most resources had the greatest power and therefore had the ability to influence decision-making. In other words, the ability to influence decision-making was assumed to be an indicator of the power one possessed. The use of Blood and Wolfe’s theoretical model can still be observed in the literature today. For example, Gauthier, Forsyth, and Bankston (1993) investigated the influence of wives’ occupation on the structure of decision-making authority in the families of offshore oil workers.

Several researchers have expanded on Blood and Wolfe’s model to include ideology as an important factor in marital decision-making. For example, Rodman (1972) includes cultural expectations of male authority in addition to resources in his theory of resources in cultural context. Kingsbury and Scanzoni (1989) argue that resources alone do not explain marital decision-making and maintain that differences in husbands’ and wives’ sex role ideologies are an important factor in negotiation processes and outcomes of decision-making. Vogler (1998) maintains that gender role ideology influences decisions of money management within households more strongly than the resource of income.

Blood and Wolfe’s study and resource theory more generally have been criticized on several fronts. Eichler (1981) argues that Blood and Wolfe assume that husbands and

wives are rational beings without emotions, and therefore overlook the manipulation of feelings (such as love, guilt, or shame) as a source of power. Hanks (1993) also points to the importance of the emotional dimension of family decision-making. In addition, the resources theory of marital power has been criticized for ignoring the decision-making *process* (Hollerbach 1980; Kranichfeld 1987; Mizan 1994) and instead focusing on outcomes alone (Hollerbach 1980; Kingsbury and Scanzoni 1989). Finally, Eichler (1981) argues that the resources theory of marital power does not account for the fact that one spouse may be genuinely disinterested in making certain decisions. Eichler suggests that the relevance of the link between resources (such as income and education) and marital decision-making has not been established.

#### *Alternatives to the resource/power perspective*

A theoretical model of decision-making for dual-earner couples put forth by Barnett and Lundgren (1998) provides an alternative to the resource/power perspective. Barnett and Lundgren argue that the decision-making process is far too complex to be captured by any theory confining itself to a single factor such as resources. They note that power (measured by income), cultural expectations, occupational prestige, workplace conditions, individual characteristics (i.e. age, parental status, employment status, gender), and structural factors (i.e. social programs, the economy) must be considered when examining the decision-making process of dual-earner couples. In addition, Barnett and Lundgren maintain that the personal needs, desires, and values of each partner must be taken into account. Finally, they note that most theories consider strategies to integrate work and family as individual decisions. However, this perspective

eliminates the possibility that decisions may be made in conjunction with a partner (Barnett and Lundgren 1998). While Barnett and Lundgren's theoretical framework is used to examine dual-earner couples' decisions about the amount of time spent in paid employment, they note that other work/family decisions might also benefit from a similar analysis.

Contemporary work on family decision-making highlights the complexity of this phenomenon and continues to refine and enhance work done in past decades. Much of the current work in this area focuses on decisions involving the allocation of money (e.g. see Dolan and Stum 1998; Vogler 1998), the division of household labour (e.g. see Perry Jenkins and Crouter 1990), and paid employment (e.g. see Barnett and Lundgren 1998; Zvonkovic et al. 1996). Some researchers argue that because family decision-making studies have often relied solely on the wife's point of view the husband's perspective may be distorted (Kingsbury and Scanzoni 1989; Mizan 1994), or even ignored (Valentine 1999). Others (e.g. see Godwin and Scanzoni 1989; Zvonkovic et al. 1996) maintain that the kind of issue being negotiated makes a difference in how partners engage in decision-making, therefore each area of decision-making (such as the division of labour or the allocation of economic resources) should be examined separately. In terms of relationship characteristics, both communication style (Godwin and Scanzoni 1989) and interdependency (Eichler 1981) are noted in the literature as being important factors in setting the context for the decision-making process. Some research suggests that it is usually one family member who makes most of the major decisions in the family (e.g. see Gauthier, Forsyth and Bankston 1993; Hardill et al. 1997; Sullivan 1996; Zvonkovic et al. 1996).

Zvonkovic et al. (1996) argue that interpersonal processes such as the degree of agreement or disagreement are an important part of the decision-making process between couples. Their qualitative study of married couples revealed that decision-making styles ranged from consensus, to contention underlying consensus, to active contention. According to these researchers, the most insidious form of power occurs when one partner believes that decisions are made together even when one partner's wishes (usually the husband's) are given precedence. In addition, they note that the outcomes of previous decisions play a role in determining the level of resistance involved in subsequent decision-making.

### *Gender relations*

Most contemporary literature and research focuses on decision-making as a process embedded within a wider context of unequal gender relations. Men's and women's decision-making power within the family is clearly associated with their situation in the larger society (Agarwal 1997). Eichler (1981) argues that researchers must study the social structure within which certain decisions are being made and consider the relationship of individual decisions to the overall power structure of society.

Zvonkovic et al. (1996) argue that the ways in which couples negotiate decisions about paid employment and family are active processes of constructing and reconstructing gender. This study also found that though couples rarely identified power issues that affected their decision-making, underlying power properties (that often produced favourable outcomes for the husband) strongly affected how they perceived their work and family situations and their decision-making style. Agarwal (1997)

postulates that social norms and practices that often favour men over women, define which issues can be legitimately discussed in the decision-making process and which issues fall in the realm of the unquestionable.

### *Families and other social institutions*

Studies on decision-making in recent decades have also echoed feminist concerns regarding the link between families and social institutions. Eichler (1981) notes that Blood and Wolfe's approach assumes that the family is an invariant, self-contained unit and as a result external constraints and opportunities that affect family decision-making are neglected. Agarwal (1997) emphasizes the need to link intra-household bargaining to the market, community, and state institutions in which households are embedded. Hanks (1993) attends to the complexity of family decision-making in the context of time and information constraints imposed by organizations such as hospitals and workplaces. Andersen (1991) maintains that the types of decisions families must negotiate also depend upon the employment status of family members. Researchers have demonstrated that the organization of the workplace affects decision-making authority in the family (Gauthier, Forsyth and Bankston 1993); reproductive decision-making (Gerson 1985; Gerson 1993; Ranson 1998); location and mobility decisions (Anderson 1992; Hardill et al. 1997); and decisions to reduce work hours (Barnett and Lundgren 1998).

### *Diversity in families*

Acknowledgement of diversity in family forms and experiences has resulted in a gradual increase in the amount of research on gay and lesbian families. Some researchers

have compared gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples to determine whether conflict resolution styles vary by sexual orientation or gender (e.g. see Metz, Rosser and Strapko 1994) while others (e.g. see Causby et al. 1995) have focused exclusively on conflict resolution in lesbian relationships. Reilly and Lynch (1990) examine the ability of resource theory to predict decision-making power in lesbian relationships. Sullivan (1996) and Dunne (1998) explore the ways in which lesbian co-parents decide upon work and family arrangements in terms of paid work, reproductive decisions, and family and domestic responsibilities. Dunne argues that lesbian couples have greater flexibility when negotiating divisions of labour as they occupy a similar position on the gender hierarchy, and share comparable gender ideologies and experience. Others (e.g. see DePoy and Noble 1992 cited in Dolan and Stum 1998) have studied financial decision-making processes in same sex couples.

A review of the literature on decision-making in families reveals significant shifts in the way that this aspect of family life is theorized and studied. Since the pioneering work of Blood and Wolfe, several important dimensions of decision-making have come to the fore. Both the ideological and emotional aspects of family decision-making have been recognized. In addition, rather than focusing on outcomes alone, many scholars today recognize decision-making as a process – one that is indisputably gendered. Also, the salience of the issue being discussed, and external constraints and opportunities, are known to influence the decision-making process. Finally, it has become apparent that there is great diversity in decision-making styles and dynamics across couples.



## **Reproductive decision-making**

Contrary to much of the work on family decision-making more broadly, there are important differences in the way that reproductive decision-making has been studied. For example, research on reproductive decision-making often focuses on individuals, rather than couples. For instance, some research investigates how the social characteristics of one partner (usually the woman) impact the timing of childbirth (Corijn and Liefbroer 1996). Miller and Pasta (1996), who focus on the psychology of reproduction decision-making, are an exception as they gathered data on married couples' disagreement and the effect on fertility intentions. Another exception is Veevers (1980) who interviewed both women and men (but not partners) about their decision to remain childless. In fact, many studies examine the decision to remain childless (e.g. see Baum 1982; Baum 1983; Dietz 1984; Nave Herz 1989; Rovi 1994; Rowland 1982).

Research on reproductive decisions in developed countries such as Canada tends to focus on the ways in which adolescent girls resolve issues surrounding unintended pregnancies (e.g. see Donovan 1992; Namerow, Kalmuss and Cushman 1993; Warren and Johnson 1989). In addition, much of the research on reproductive decision-making focuses on women and the transition to motherhood (e.g. see Sugarman 1985; Trost 1990). Less commonly explored are men and decisions about fatherhood (Gerson 1993).

McMahon (1995) investigates how middle and working-class women's sense of self is transformed through the process of becoming mothers. She concludes that motherhood is not simply an expression of female identity but rather the experience of motherhood produced a gendered sense of self for mothers. Gerson (1985) traces the life histories of middle and working class women in an effort to understand why some

women choose to commit to a traditional domestic lifestyle while others follow a less traditional route towards careers, and even childlessness. Gerson found that women's early orientations may be supported or undermined by the social circumstances that they confront as they progress through adulthood. The reproductive decisions of women were also examined by Currie (1988) who interviewed women about their postponement or rejection of motherhood. Currie concludes that reproductive decisions are essentially personal solutions to dilemmas set up by structural processes. Ranson (1998) explores the link between educational and occupational choices and the timing of women's transition to motherhood. Ranson concludes that the organization of paid work influences women's decisions about the "right time" to have a child.

The work on reproductive decision-making is important as it reveals some of the issues faced by women and men as they struggle with decisions surrounding parenthood. However, it obscures the decision-making *process* that participants engage in with their partners and the perspectives that their partners bring to the process. It appears that much of the work on reproductive decision-making has not been informed by previous work on decision-making more generally. However, insights from the research in the broader area of family decision-making can be utilized to explore how couples make reproductive decisions. For instance, this research emphasizes that decision-making is a process; points to the role of institutions in decision-making; raises issues of emotionality; and reveals that decision-making is a gendered process.

For this research project I have chosen to incorporate couples in an effort to address some of the gaps in the reproductive decision-making literature. For instance, previous work on reproductive decision-making does not illuminate how the decision-

making *process* unfolds, or how the dynamics of intimate relationships are implicated in this process. In addition, it is not clear what kinds of issues *couples* face when making decisions about parenthood. Speaking to couples about their experiences will enable me to explore these aspects of reproduction that have been overlooked in the literature on reproductive decision-making.

The following chapter outlines the methods utilized to gather, analyze, and interpret data. Chapter Three contains a discussion of the ways in which the decision-making process unfolded for the couples in this study. The outcomes resulting from this process are presented in Chapter Four. Chapter Five explores how expectations for parenthood are implicated in reproductive decision-making. Finally, Chapter Six highlights some of the implications of the findings, as well as several suggestions for the direction and focus of future work on reproductive decision-making.

## **Chapter Two: Methods**

The target group for this project was cohabiting couples who had faced decisions about children. As making a decision implies that at least one partner is able to control their fertility, I sought childless couples who were practising birth control, as well as parents who had used contraception to control the timing and number of children,. As I noted in the previous chapter, I want to explore the decision-making process that couples engage in when faced with decisions about whether and/or when to have children. Therefore I needed to find couples who had also talked to their partners about whether or not they wanted children.

### **Sampling**

Theoretical sampling logic and practical considerations guided the sample selection for this project. In theoretical sampling, the goal is not to generate a sample that “represents” the wider population in a statistical sense. Rather, a theoretically meaningful sample is constructed by incorporating certain characteristics or criteria which help to develop or test a theory and explanation (Mason 1996). Therefore, I attempted to include couples who were diverse enough to encompass a broad range of experiences and approaches to reproductive decision-making. For the same reason, I included couples from various age groups. Ultimately, the goal is to increase the ability to make *theoretical* generalizations based on the research findings.

Couples both with and without children were sampled as this allowed for an exploration of the processes associated with a range of reproductive decisions such as birth timing and number of children, as well as the decision to remain childless. The decision to interview cohabiting couples is based on the assumption that couples who are living in common-law or marital relationships are more likely to have discussed their reproductive plans than couples in non-cohabiting relationships. Gay and lesbian couples were not included in this study for two reasons. While these couples may engage in reproductive decision-making, they do not utilize pregnancy prevention technologies. Rather they are more likely to use reproductive procedures that enable conception. In addition, the dynamics surrounding reproductive decisions are more complex for gay and lesbian couples, as these decisions necessarily involve a third party such as a doctor, sperm donor, fertility clinic, or adoption agency.

Couples were selected from the same city in western Canada. They were solicited through advertisements posted in a variety of locations. Notices were posted on message boards on two web sites—one for childfree couples (iVillage.com 2001) and one for parents (Parentsplace.com 2001). In addition, posters were placed on bulletin boards at four hospitals, four community family service agencies, two grocery stores, 11 public health clinics, two libraries, two recreational facilities, two fitness centre, one multicultural centre, one international student centre, one immigrant women's association, and six public pools. As these facilities are located in various neighbourhoods throughout the city I hoped that they would attract participants from diverse backgrounds.

The posters generated three responses, two from posters in public health clinics and one from a hospital posting. However, only two couples met the sampling criteria. The web site advertisement generated three inquiries, but unfortunately none of these couples met the criteria for inclusion in this study.

Due to the low response rate to the postings, two alternative strategies were utilized. First, participants were solicited through friends, colleagues, and other acquaintances. Secondly, additional participants were contacted through snowball sampling. In an effort to keep the social network as broad as possible I used multiple starting points for contacting couples. In addition, I limited the number of couples contacted through any one source. Acquaintance referrals and snowball sampling generated the remaining 24 participants (12 couples) in the sample. In total, fourteen couples who fit the sampling criteria agreed to participate in the study.

The three sampling strategies outlined above were used with the intention of obtaining a diverse sample in terms of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and so on. However these methods did not generate as much variation as anticipated. For example, this group of participants was relatively well-educated. Nineteen of the 28 participants had university degrees, an additional seven had some post-secondary training, and two had high school diplomas. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 44 years old at the time of the interviews and had been married or living common-law from four months to 19 years. While this sample is relatively homogeneous in terms of social class and ethnicity, it is important to reiterate that theoretical sampling does not aim to generate a statistically representative sample. Therefore, this sample is quite adequate for the purposes of an exploratory study such as this one.

The lack of diversity in terms of socioeconomic status is more than likely because the sample contained many participants who were referrals from my colleagues, friends, and acquaintances. In addition, because these volunteers were a well-educated and articulate group, they may have been familiar with social science research and therefore more inclined to participate. For example, two nurses remarked that while in nursing school they had difficulty recruiting families for interviews. As they recognized the challenges of obtaining participants, and were sympathetic to this kind of research, they volunteered to participate in the study.

In the initial stages of this research the strategy was to interview couples who had made a deliberate “decision” to have children or to remain childless. Participants with children were screened on the phone by asking whether they planned the timing of their children or if they were “taken by surprise”. The logic behind this was to ensure that all of the couples who were interviewed were faced with the same choice (whether or not to have children) and that they were free to choose either option. Therefore, infertile couples were excluded from the sampling frame as circumstances beyond their control prevented them from having children.

For similar reasons, couples who became pregnant unexpectedly were also initially excluded. These couples had not reached a decision when to start a family, rather they were faced with determining whether they would keep a child that had already been conceived. The decision to exclude these couples was founded on two assumptions. First, the decision was based on the premise that for most couples reproductive decision-making is a methodical process involving a certain degree of planning. Secondly, this

strategy presumed that participants had the desire and/or the ability to reach a definitive decision and that ultimately they would do that.

However, it became clear after conducting several interviews that the concept of “decision” was problematic. For example, should couples be excluded who became pregnant one year earlier than they planned, even if they had decided that they definitely wanted children, but had not yet decided when? What about couples who were undecided as to whether they would have children? These couples had engaged in reproductive decision-making even though they might not have reached a definitive decision as to whether or when to have children. As the study progressed it became clear that including couples at various points in the decision-making process would provide a more comprehensive picture of this complex phenomenon. As a result, three couples who had determined that they wanted to become parents but whose children arrived earlier than expected were included in the sample. One couple who identified themselves as undecided about children was also included.

### **Data collection**

Approval for this project was obtained from the university ethics review board prior to soliciting participants. In order to obtain ethics approval I needed to address issues of confidentiality, anonymity, and informed consent. These issues are outlined in greater detail in the consent form given to participants (See Appendix A).



## *Method*

Due to the somewhat sensitive and personal nature of reproductive choice, this topic does not lend itself to methods of data collection such as focus groups where participants are required to disclose their thoughts to other group members. Therefore, in-depth semi-structured interviews were utilized to gather data. The interviews lasted from approximately 45 minutes to more than two hours. Participants were asked to choose a location that they felt would provide the private and uninterrupted environment necessary for the interview. Many participants chose to be interviewed at home or at their place of work. Each interview was tape-recorded and later transcribed.

Each partner was interviewed separately. The logic underlying this strategy was twofold. First, I assumed that in at least some cases one partner might evaluate the decision-making process quite differently from their companion. Secondly, some partners might be more willing to express their feelings and views in the privacy of a one-on-one interview. These assumptions were premised on a feminist theoretical perspective of family life. Feminist scholars recognize that family members often have divergent and conflicting interests and differential abilities to pursue and realize those interests, and therefore acknowledge that power relations and conflict also play a role in families (Agarwal 1997; Andersen 1991).

In a number of cases where the interview took place at home, the participant's partner was also home. In all but two cases the partner who was not being interviewed was in another room and out of hearing range. In the remaining two cases the partner who was not participating in the interview hovered in an out of what might have been hearing distance. This posed a bit of a dilemma as the interview was supposed to be a

private conversation. However, I decided to let the participant judge whether their partner's close proximity made them uneasy. Neither of the two participants made comments suggesting that they were uncomfortable with the situation. If they had I would have asked the other partner to give us more privacy. While this solution was not ideal it was the one I felt most comfortable with under the circumstances.

*Methodological issues—researching couples*

As noted above, the decision to interview each partner separately was based on the premise that power relations are implicated in family dynamics. However, interviewing couples separately also finds support in the literature from a methodological standpoint. The question of whom to interview, and whether household members should be interviewed together or apart, has been debated in the literature. While in some cases the research question determines the options available, in other cases one partner (usually the woman) is chosen based on the assumption that s/he can speak for both partners. This is especially apparent in family research because the home, domestic work, and the family have been regarded as women's domain (Valentine 1999).

It is important not to assume that one partner speaks for both. However, researchers who choose to interview both partners are faced with new methodological dilemmas. For instance, should both partners be interviewed together or separately? Some researchers (e.g. see Bennett and McAvity 1992; Sandelowski, Holditch-Davis and Harris 1992) have noted that joint interviews, where both partners are interviewed together, provide a way to get men to participate in discussions about areas of family life where their input has previously been ignored. Others (Allan 1980; Valentine 1999)

point to joint interviews as a way to stimulate memory recall. Finally, joint interviews may provide an opportunity for the interviewer to learn how the couple's relationship functions, by observing how they support or undermine each other in the process of constructing a collaborative account for the interviewer (Valentine 1999).

Proponents of separate interviews point to the disadvantages of joint interviews and maintain that spouses may be less willing or able to express their own perspectives when interviewed jointly (LaRossa, Bennett and Gelles 1981). For example, Hertz (1995:433) notes that in pilot interviews where spouses were interviewed as a couple, one spouse did most of the talking, leaving her to wonder whether she was getting individual views on the decision-making process or merely an "official family account". Separate interviews, on the other hand, allow spouses to present different versions of the same story (Hertz 1995). Finally, individual interviews also have the advantage of providing participants with the privacy required if they wish to disclose information that their partner may not be aware of or if they wish to discuss any negative feelings about their partner or their relationship (Hertz 1995; Valentine 1999). One interviewee in the current study noted near the end of the interview that he would not have participated if the format had been a joint interview:

David: Yeah, I wouldn't have done it together. If [Nancy] had told me that you wanted to [interview] us together I wouldn't have done it.

Shelley: No?

David: No because you're under pressure, or not pressure but you know if I'm giving you an answer that I firmly believe in, if [Nancy's] sitting right beside me I might not give you that answer.

Shelley: Yeah, it's a different dynamic, yeah.

David: I mean we've been married 10 years and as much as we've been married for 10 years, we have a kid, there's still you know things we disagree with all the time.

Hertz also points to the ways in which couples construct joint stories when retelling incidents and argues that separate interviews disrupt these shared accounts:

Separate but simultaneous interviewing disrupts the couple's collective memory of events and feelings. Each spouse has to respond to in-depth questions without consulting his or her partner. It is not that one version of the story may be the more accurate, it is that the consensus over how they think about previous decisions is not so easily presented without the shared memory of the other spouse (Hertz 1995:434).

One of the advantages of disrupting couples' joint stories through the use of separate interviews is that partners place themselves at the center of the story. This allows them to explain the accommodations that they may have made in an effort to reconcile their own approach with their partner's—ultimately this makes the couple's composite story much richer (Hertz 1995). While there are many important advantages to separate interviews, the data that they generate present the researcher with new dilemmas for data analysis. These challenges will be outlined in detail below.

### *Perspectives on interview data*

While it is possible to choose from a variety of methodological approaches to interview data, the method chosen depends upon the researcher's epistemological standpoint. Positivist approaches to interviewing view subjects as passive "vessels of answers" (Holstein and Gubrium 1997:116). Interviewers direct questions to a subject who in turn provides the interviewer with "true"app facts and feelings. This approach

provides interviewers with a host of interview techniques in order to minimize bias in the respondent's answers (Holstein and Gubrium 1997). For example, interviewers are directed to ask questions in a neutral manner, so as not to sway the respondent in one direction or another. The goal of positivist interviewing is to provide an interview setting that allows the respondent to provide an undistorted "mirror reflection" of the reality that exists in the social world (Miller and Glassner 1997).

Holstein and Gubrium (1997) maintain that this traditional perspective is based on the assumption that the respondent is a passive rather than an active producer of knowledge. They advocate an alternative perspective where interviews are social encounters in which knowledge is constructed through interaction. Interview responses are seen as products of the interaction and subsequent meaning construction that occur between interviewer and respondent:

Both parties to the interview are necessarily and ineluctably *active*. Meaning is not merely elicited by apt questioning, nor simply transported through respondent replies; it is actively and communicatively assembled in the interview encounter. Respondents are not so much repositories of knowledge...as they are constructors of knowledge in collaboration with interviewers (Holstein and Gubrium 1997:114, emphasis original).

Holstein and Gubrium (1997) argue that interviewers should acknowledge, and capitalize upon, the contributions of both the interviewer and the respondent in the production of interview data. The interview is an occasion not only for discovering or conveying information, but also for constructing it. From this perspective, understanding how the meaning-making process unfolds in an interview is just as important as what questions are asked and what answers are given.

Consistent with this approach, Holstein and Gubrium advocate “active” (1997:120) interviewing in which the subject’s interpretive capabilities are activated by an active interviewer. The active interviewer provokes responses and activates the respondent’s knowledge about issues relevant to the research agenda. Ultimately, the goal is to enable the participant to expand their thoughts on a particular topic in new and previously unexplored ways. According to Holstein and Gubrium, “The objective is not to dictate interpretation, but to provide an environment conducive to the production of the range and complexity of meanings that address relevant issues, and not be confined by predetermined agendas” (Holstein and Gubrium 1997:123).

Adherents of positivist interviewing assert that if interviews are done in an unbiased manner, respondents will provide answers that reflect “reality”. On the other hand, the work of Holstein and Gubrium (1997), taken to its purest social constructionist extreme, suggests that interviews cannot provide knowledge about a reality existing beyond the interview since, in the interview process, researcher and participant create narrative versions of the social world that are context-specific.

There does exist a position that provides some middle ground between the positivist and the pure social constructionist position. Miller and Glassner (1997) describe an approach that they call interactionist. Interactionist research starts from the belief that people create and maintain meaningful social worlds. Knowledge of social worlds is achieved through “intersubjective depth” and deep “mutual understanding” (Miller and Glassner 1997:106). According to this perspective:

Research cannot provide the mirror reflection of the social world that positivists strive for, but it may provide access to the meanings people attribute to their experiences and social worlds. While the interview is itself a symbolic interaction, this does not discount the possibility that knowledge of the social world beyond the interaction can be obtained. (Miller and Glassner 1997:100).

Narratives that emerge in interview contexts are situated in social worlds that exist outside of the interview context—participants draw on cultural narratives to explain their actions and make them understandable to others. Therefore, interactionist researchers are able to learn about and produce authentic accounts of respondents' social worlds by studying narratives that emerge in the interview. In sum, studying narratives allows the researcher to better understand the social world of the participants (Miller and Glassner 1997). The perspectives put forth by these authors open up several possibilities for data analysis that contrast with traditional positivist approaches, all of which are outlined below.

### *The interviews*

The interview format chosen for this project is consistent with the work of Holstein and Gubrium (1997). For example, the interview was not structured in such a way as to reduce “bias” as positivist researchers suggest. Rather, the interview contained open-ended questions that addressed general themes. In addition, new issues and questions that arose during the course of the interviews were explored with participants in what Holstein and Gubrium would call an “active” way.

Interviews focused on the decision-making process that partners engaged in when trying to determine whether or not to have children. The interview themes were

organized in general chronological order such that participants were asked questions about their thoughts on parenthood prior to meeting their current partner, in the early stages of their relationship, and in their present situation. In addition, I wanted to explore what kinds of issues couples discussed when trying to make their decision. Also included were questions that tapped into the power dynamics in the participant's relationship with their partner. More specifically, I was interested in whether one partner had more say in the decision. Therefore, participants were asked who brought up the topic of children, who led the discussions about children, and if the process was similar to other major decisions they had made. Some of the literature on decision-making suggests that to varying degrees ideology is implicated in the family decisions that people make (e.g. see Fox 1997; Gerson 1985; Gerson 1993; Hertz 1997). Therefore, I also included interview questions that addressed ideologies of motherhood, fatherhood, and gender.

Interview themes for couples with children also addressed decisions about the number and timing of children. Near the end of the interviews participants were asked demographic questions, such as employment status, occupation, and level of education, in an effort to obtain a general picture of socioeconomic status. After each interview was completed a research memo was prepared that described the context of the interview and any observations or preliminary interpretations of important material.

The interview guide was modified several times over the course of the study. One pilot interview revealed that it would be useful to have separate guides for parents, couples who planned to remain childless, and couples who planned to have children. New questions were added, deleted, or re-phrased as the study progressed. Some questions were quite abstract and several participants had difficulty answering them. For



example, similar to women in previous research (e.g. see McMahon 1995; Tietjens Meyers 2001), the participants who had children (or planned to have them in the future) had difficulty expressing the reasons why they wanted children. As a result, the question was re-phrased to ask how participants would feel if they found out they could *not* have children. (See Appendices B, C, and D for copies of the revised interview guides).

The way that the interview guide was used also changed over the course of the study. In the interviews that were conducted early in the research, I did not stray far from the questions outlined in the guide. However, as the study progressed and my confidence increased, I began to refer to the guide less frequently. Rather I focused on covering general themes and aimed at making the interview less formal and more conversational.

A central principle of feminist research is the recognition that the social location, standpoint, and interests of the researcher are imposed during the research process. These not only define the questions to be asked, but shape observations, interpretations, and representations of data (Hertz 1995; Taylor 1996). Self-reflexivity – the acknowledgement of the researcher’s location of self in relation to research participants – plays an important role in feminist methodology. I recognize that my own social position, as a white, heterosexual, middle-class woman, is thoroughly implicated in the methodological decisions that I have made during the course of this research project. In addition, as a childless woman facing the question of whether or not to have children, I project a great deal of myself onto this topic. My story, as a researcher, is the story to which feminists have drawn attention in their call for greater self-reflexivity. As Hertz argues:

Whereas in the past, sociologists were instructed to ignore or obscure their story in searching for “the story”, it has become increasingly obvious that [the researcher’s story] must be examined closely if we are to better understand and more accurately depict how we know what we know (Hertz 1995:442).

The interviews, following Holstein and Gubrium (1997), were conceptualized as a process of knowledge construction and collaboration. As a researcher working within this framework this afforded me the opportunity to disclose my thoughts on various topics to the participants whom I was interviewing. In addition, my work, like the work of Taylor (1996), Hertz (1995) and others, has been influenced by feminist research that values openness and reciprocity between the researcher and the research participant. I therefore spoke openly with participants about my thoughts on parenthood and the decision-making process that I have engaged in with my partner. As Hertz (1995) notes, self-disclosure of this kind changes the dynamics of the interview. Specifically, the interviewer shifts from a neutral questioner to a participant, while participants are given the freedom to ask questions of the interviewer. When conducting interviews for this study, many participants did ask personal questions. I attempted to answer these questions with what I felt was a comfortable and appropriate degree of openness.

Self-disclosure is not only important from a methodological standpoint. On a more personal level, as a researcher I was more comfortable participating in interviews in which there was, at least to some degree, a mutual exchange of feelings and ideas. This seemed to minimize the power imbalance often inherent in the interview process. It was also rewarding in the sense that some participants were able to take something away from the interview. Several people commented during or after the interviews that they either enjoyed the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings on this topic, or that they

liked the conversational style of the interviews. Hertz outlines the advantages of collaborative interviews:

Altering the power dynamics between researcher and respondent makes the interview a collaborative process where experience and information are exchanged. Put differently, first, respondents help to create the interview as agents rather than objects of study and, second, the interview becomes socially constructed by the unique interactions of each respondent with the interviewer (Hertz 1995:431)

### **Data analysis and interpretation**

There are a variety of methods for interpreting transcribed interview data, three of which will be discussed here. One analytic strategy aims at reducing the original text by paraphrasing, summarizing or categorizing the data (Flick 1998). A variable-centered approach in which the researcher searches for a particular characteristic or characteristics (variables) in all of the cases studied is one method that utilizes this strategy. The findings presented in Chapter Five were derived from a variable-centered approach in which key themes were extracted from the data. The interview transcripts from a subsample of eight childless couples were examined. These interview data were analyzed first by searching for themes common to the childless women and were then compared to themes that emerged from the interviews with childless men. In subsequent analysis the couples were separated into two groups; those planning to have children and those not planning to have children. Each of the two groups contained four couples, or eight individual cases. First, key themes were extracted from the interview data of participants who were planning to have children. Second, key themes were extracted from the interview data of the participants not planning to have children. I further analyzed data

by re-reading the transcripts in each of the two groups and placing each group (of four couples) into a typology.

Some researchers argue that rearranging the text into categories or themes strips away the context or “gestalt” of the text, and for this reason advocate approaches (such as narrative analyses) in which context sensitivity is a methodological principle (Flick 1998). Holstein and Gubrium (1997) maintain that categorizing and summarizing interview data minimizes the importance of the interpretive process of the interview. These researchers propose an alternative approach in which active interview data are analyzed to demonstrate how what respondents say is related to how reality is constructed. They maintain that the analytical focus should be placed on the process of reality construction:

[Respondents’ answers] are considered for the ways that they construct aspects of reality in collaboration with the interviewer. The focus is as much on the assembly process as on what is assembled (Holstein and Gubrium 1997:127).

As active interviewing techniques were utilized when conducting interviews for this project, the potential exists to explore the process of reality construction contained in the interview transcripts. This would have made for an interesting analysis, however the scope of this project did not permit an investigation of this sort. Nevertheless, these data could be further analyzed in this manner at a later date.

The goal of the third analytic strategy is to contextualize statements in the text, which involves augmenting the textual material with interpretive statements (Flick 1998). One example of this strategy is the case-centered approach. In contrast to a variable-centered approach, the case-centered approach first attempts to understand the salient

features of an entire case in a holistic manner. The goal is not to reduce the material into particular categories or common themes but rather to analyze and interpret the case as a whole.

In this project, I used the interview data to guide my analytic decisions. As these interview data lent themselves to a holistic approach much of the data analysis is consistent with a case-centered approach. For example, in Chapter Four each couple is treated as a case. Cases were then compared in relation to other cases and placed on a decision-making continuum. Couples are also treated as cases in Chapter Three where the decision-making dynamics within each case were explored and compared to other cases.

Narratives and shared stories also emerged from these data. As reproductive decision-making is an ongoing and evolving process, it is not surprising that these data were suitable for a narrative analysis. In Chapter Three, I give examples of shared as well as contradictory stories of the decision-making process. When partners are interviewed separately, and their accounts differ, the researcher is faced with a dilemma – how to make sense of contradictory stories (Hertz 1995). Hertz advocates the following approach in dealing with contrary accounts:

The researcher may be tempted to believe that there is one true story and that the problem is one of deciding which spouse is telling the truth. Alternatively...the researcher may be tempted to believe that it is her unique task to construct (or discern) the truth. Nevertheless, both approaches fail to register the critical insight; how everything else the individual says will help you understand why he or she chose to tell that story that way. In other words, the fact of a difference in detail or in emphasis is a signal to search beyond the story for clues as to why the story was told and why it was told in a particular way – not a signal to search for the “real truth” because such a truth is not likely to be found (1995:438).

The holistic analytic approach utilized in Chapter Three is consistent with the above recommendation as it enables the researcher to place the story in question in the context of the participant's entire account of the decision-making process. While Hertz's advice to look beyond the story to the broader social context of the participants' lives should not be dismissed the scope of this project only allows for a preliminary discussion in that direction. This is explored in greater detail in the final chapter. In Chapter Three I simply highlight the couples' shared or contradictory stories, rather than focusing on *why* some couples had conflicting accounts.

### **Issues of quality in qualitative research**

There are many competing claims as to the ways in which quality should be assessed in qualitative research (Seale 1999). According to positivist perspectives, quality in qualitative research can be assessed in terms of reliability and validity. Qualitative researchers working within a positivist paradigm use the concepts of validity and reliability to judge the quality of qualitative research. Validity results from the successful application of procedures designed to eliminate bias. Reliability occurs when frequently repeated data collection leads to the same data and results. In this context, interview questions are deemed reliable if they consistently produce the same results in different situations, or at different times (Holstein and Gubrium 1997).

Some researchers (e.g. see Flick 1998; Holstein and Gubrium 1997; Mason 1996; Seale 1999; Silverman 1993) have suggested that the concepts of reliability and validity, as they are traditionally conceived, are not directly applicable to the assessment of the

quality of qualitative research. For example, in the case of reliability, it is unreasonable to expect that answers given by a respondent on one occasion will correspond with answers given on another occasion as the circumstances of knowledge production differ from interview to interview (Holstein and Gubrium 1997). In terms of validity, the issue of bias is a concern only if one believes that there is some “true” pre-formed, untainted response that the interviewer may somehow contaminate:

In the vessel-of-answers approach, the image of the subject is epistemologically passive, not engaged in the production of knowledge. If the interviewing process goes ‘by the book’ and is non-directional and unbiased, respondents will validly give out what subjects are presumed to merely retain within them—the unadulterated facts and details of experience. Contamination emanates from the interview setting, its participants and their interaction, not the subject, who, under ideal conditions, serves up authentic reports when beckoned to do so (Holstein and Gubrium 1997:117).

However, if meanings are created through interaction between interviewer and respondent, and are continually being assembled and modified during the interview process, the concept of bias is no longer a meaningful concept (Holstein and Gubrium 1997).

Silverman (1993) notes that although traditional notions of reliability and validity may not apply to qualitative research, we cannot afford to ignore these concepts altogether. For example, field research that ignores validity tends to have an “anecdotal quality” (Silverman 1993:153). “Anecdotal” field research can be overcome by using analytic induction which involves searching for negative cases that are expected to contradict the researcher’s hypothesis (Silverman 1993). In this way, researchers can demonstrate that the explanation that they have developed has been tested against alternative explanations. Mason (1996) notes that hypothesis testing is only one reason to

use analytic induction. If a researcher is able to demonstrate that they have considered, and found wanting, alternative explanations for the issue at hand the rigour of their analysis and the potential for saying it has a wider theoretical resonance is greatly increased (Mason 1996).

Silverman maintains that there are more appropriate methods for establishing the “reliability” and “validity” of qualitative research than positivist approaches imply. For example, the reliability of interview data can be improved by comparing the analyses of the same data by several researchers (Silverman 1993). In addition, providing an audit trail in which researchers keep records of how data have been interpreted increases reliability.

Another technique used by researchers to assess the quality of their work is called “respondent validation” (Mason 1996:151). This method involves providing participants with extracts of the researcher’s data analysis and interpretation and asking them to provide input on whether they feel that they have been fairly represented. Mason notes that this approach can be problematic:

Given that qualitative researchers are likely to be trading in social science interpretations, based on social science conventions, there is no reason to suppose that research subjects who are unfamiliar with these will have either interest in them, or knowledge about how they operate (Mason 1996:152).

As a result, depending upon the nature of the research question and the type of data analysis, participants may not have the tools required to establish an informed opinion about the researcher’s interpretation of the data.

Finally, it has been argued that qualitative social scientists should resist the urge to generate an overarching set of criteria for judging good quality research (Seale 1999).



Seale suggests that the practice of doing research should not be expected to conform to a particular philosophical position. Rather, researchers should draw on the discourses and skills developed in various paradigms as resources. Referring to quality, Seale argues:

“Quality” is a somewhat elusive phenomenon that cannot be pre-specified by methodological rules, though their reconstitution as “guidelines,” to be followed with intelligence and knowledge of the particular research context, may assist us in moving toward good quality work. A major threat to quality is in fact the idea that research must be carried out under the burden of fulfilling some philosophical or methodological scheme. Practicing social researchers can learn to do good work from a variety of examples, done within different “moments,” without needing to resolve methodological disputes before beginning their work. At the same time, the quality of qualitative research is enhanced if researchers engage with philosophical and methodological debate...(Seale 1999:471-472).

Consistent with Seale’s approach, the methodological decisions made during this research process were informed by this debate, and the methods chosen were used as guidelines for conducting the research. However, as social research is a “craft skill” (Seale 1999:465), in large part learned through experience, these decisions were not made definitively prior to beginning the research, but rather the issues were engaged with in an ongoing fashion throughout the research process. An important part of this engagement is the use of research memos. This involves recording the steps through which interpretations are made (Mason 1996). This enables the researcher to explain how interpretations of the data are reached and to demonstrate how the data were pieced together when formulating interpretations.

#### *Approaches to quality utilized in this study*

I used research memos in two ways to increase the quality of the data analysis. First, as Mason (1996) recommends, research memos were used to record the ways in

which the interpretations that arose from the data analysis were arrived at. Second, after reviewing each interview transcript I would often refer back to the research memo I had prepared immediately following the interview in order to see if the current analysis was consistent with any preliminary interpretations I had made. In addition to research memos, I discussed my emerging interpretations on an ongoing basis with my thesis supervisor who had also read several of the interview transcripts. This approach is consistent with Silverman's (1993) recommendation that data analyses should be compared across researchers.

I also used an additional analytical practice as a way of checking that my interpretations were true to the participants' accounts. As themes emerged or typologies were formulated I searched for cases that did not fit the theme or typology. If any were found I ensured that these exceptional cases were discussed in the findings. Alternately, these cases were used as the basis for new themes or categories for analysis.

Finally, in an effort to ensure that the participants were represented in a fair manner I employed two additional strategies. First, wherever feasibly possible, I used participants' own words in order to illustrate that my interpretations were consistent with what the participants said. Secondly, I was careful to provide as much context as possible when presenting quotations as a way of demonstrating to the reader that a particular quote was part of a greater whole.

Researchers who utilize qualitative interviews as a method of data collection may at times question whether participants are misleading them. This concern may be especially salient when the subject matter is sensitive, as reproductive decision-making is. As a researcher I have no way of knowing for certain that the people who participated

in this study were being open with their thoughts and feelings. However, I have reason to believe that they were. First, I feel I developed a good rapport with most of the participants. As I also divulged my personal feelings and ideas about the subject matter, I believe this gave the participants the opportunity to express their thoughts in an open and honest manner. This is evidenced in the interview transcripts, which contain many examples of heartfelt and sincere accounts addressing a range of experiences, from intimate relationships, to parenthood and childlessness. On several occasions participants were on the verge of tears when relaying their stories. As the quality of the interaction between the participants and myself was high I have no reason to believe that they were being deceitful.

I chose not to use respondent validation in this study. While reproductive decision-making is an everyday experience familiar to many couples, the interpretations presented in this thesis move from the talk of daily activities to the abstract language of social science. Therefore, Mason (1996) would argue that these participants may not be the best qualified to judge the quality of the work. While there is a case to be made for bypassing respondent validation, the more critical reason I chose not to use this method is that time constraints would not have permitted me to gather participants' feedback even if I had desired to do so. While I have chosen not to use respondent validation in this study I, like Mason and other feminist researchers, feel it is important to share research with the people who make it possible. Therefore, I have promised to provide participants with a synopsis of the results.

Now that the methodological issues have been addressed I will move on to look at the reproductive decision-making process. The following chapter is one of three findings

chapters and will discuss the decision-making process that couples engaged in when trying to decide whether or when to have children. In addition, I discuss how relationship dynamics were implicated in decision-making, as well as the ways in which gender plays out in this process.

### **Chapter Three: The decision-making process**

This research project is based on the premise that reproductive decision-making is a collective enterprise. That is, from the outset I have been working with the assumption that participants do not make reproductive decisions entirely on their own. Rather, they engage in discussions with their partners about children and the choices available to them. In this chapter I will discuss the decision-making process that couples engage in when trying to determine whether and/or when they will have children. Therefore, the focus will be on the process leading up to the reproductive outcome, rather than the outcome itself.

#### **Individual accounts of “couple” behaviour**

If making decisions about children is something that couples do together, then it is also possible that they have shared accounts of the decision-making process. However, the decision to interview each partner separately also allows for the possibility that participants will have individual and potentially differing stories. Although both partners are involved (at least to some degree) in this process, one should not presume that both partners have identical accounts of the ways in which the process played out. While some couples' stories were remarkably similar, others differed considerably.

Sue<sup>1</sup>, married to her husband for more than eleven years, was a former teacher and mother of two. When asked to describe some of the early conversations that she and her husband had about children, Sue recalled their goal setting sessions. Before having children, Sue and her husband, Sam, would write down their goals and when they would like to achieve them, and then they would compare notes:

So one of the goals for me was having children. And I don't remember if it was on Sam's list, but I think for me it was about fourth out of five, something like that at that point. And then on my goal sheet it was that I wanted to have a child by the time I was 29....So we always knew, it was always on our little lists, and I don't even know that Sam will remember that we had little lists, but it will be interesting what he comes up with<sup>2</sup>.

When asked to describe how they made big decisions, Sam also recalled the goal setting sessions:

I remember before we had children she would make you know these five-year and ten-year plans. Well, she would be a good business manager, because she's always got her long term plans in place. And she'd always, we'd sit down often and she'd map it out and yes, that makes sense, or well, no I'm not quite comfortable with that, let's move that up a year. And I mean she probably in her bedside table still has a lot of these little plans.

Sue and Sam also had similar accounts of their initial steps in the decision-making process. Sam, a 35-year-old writer, explained that it was during the marriage course that he and Sue took prior to getting married that he realized that children would be a part of his future:

---

<sup>1</sup> Names and other identifying details have been changed to protect the identity of the participants

<sup>2</sup> The conventions used in this thesis are as follows: words contained within square brackets are my words, and ellipses indicate that words have been omitted in the interest of clarity.

I remember the, the interview we had with the priest and he brought up the whole thing, “And of course you’ll have children and raise them in the Catholic faith”, and it sort of hit home. At that point that oh my God, this is, this is part of marriage? [laughter] So, you know pre-marriage [course] I had never seriously considered having a family.

Sue also explained that it was the marriage course that got them thinking about children:

We always knew we wanted children. Even before we were married. That was understood....We took the marriage, um, it’s the marriage encounter, it was a week, ah, Friday night, Saturday, all day thing....So um, anyway so in the, in the marriage encounter we, they even said before you have children make sure you have your issues settled. Issues about baptism and that, don’t wait until the baby is born before you decide because you’re so, you’re so sleep deprived, have it agreed upon before you have the baby. So we knew then already that we wanted children. Because we sat in the parking lot for two or three hours, we didn’t leave the parking lot of the church after the course and we sat discussing everything.

New parents Jerry and Marilyn, who both went back to school when they were newlyweds, recalled their financial situation and more importantly Marilyn’s maternity rotation in nursing school as the catalyst to starting a family. Jerry, now a computer scientist, explained that his ability to “support” his family financially, and Marilyn’s nursing experience, were important considerations in their decision-making process:

And then especially, I don’t know if Marilyn mentioned to you, third year, her third year rotation at the children’s hospital. [laughs]

Marilyn also remarked that they considered finances but it was her maternity rotation that really kindled her desire to start a family:

Okay, well it was actually a very specific thing. In my third year of nursing school I did my maternity rotation. At the same time that I turned twenty-nine. And thirty didn't get me, twenty-nine, oh my goodness, what's going to happen, you know. Because basically what would happen is that twice a week I would have lectures about maternity, nursing and the whole pregnancy process and all of this. And the message was, well even though women are waiting later and later to have babies, your body is really ready to have children when you're eighteen, and da da da. And I was just getting all these messages, thinking oh no, oh no, what's going to happen, you know what's going to happen? And then um I just felt [very close to] the babies on my maternity rotation. At that point my husband was working very close to the hospital so he could come and meet me for lunch and he just said I was just glowing. You know, just so excited about babies. And I said look I really want to start a family as soon as we possibly can. So that was really the spark.

These narratives demonstrate couples' shared stories of the decision-making process.

However, for some couples one partner evaluated the process quite differently from the other.

Allan, whose wife, Kelley, was pregnant with their first child, felt that he played a relatively passive role in the decision-making process. When asked how he and Kelley decided when to start a family, he remarked:

I don't really think I made the decision [laughter]. I feel that it was mainly Kelley's decision and I was you know, fairly easy going about it. You know we did have that conversation prior to getting married, and we had talked about being 30 when we started trying, and Kelley informed me pretty early on that, that didn't work for her any more [laughter]....So you know, then Kelley said, well let's start trying and I kind of shrugged my shoulders and said okay dear, yes dear.

Kelley, who was 28 at the time of the interview, described the decision-making process quite differently from her husband. Prior to marriage Kelley and Allan had agreed that they would start a family when they were in their early thirties, however one year later Kelley decided she wanted to start trying. In Kelley's account, Allan had the



final say as to when they would start a family. After some negotiation, Allan agreed to start trying in January 2000:

I think for Allan [the decision to start trying] was probably easy just because he wasn't going to put himself in a situation where he didn't feel comfortable. So I think he had to think a lot of things out but it was hard for me to hear him say we're going to wait, we're going to wait and we're going to wait. I would negotiate with him, how about December 10<sup>th</sup>? I don't know, I'll just pick a day, and he's like no. And I'm like well it's only like you know twenty days from January 1. He's like I don't care. It is 2000.

Another couple also had different accounts of the planning process. Dana, a nurse and now a mother of three, was ready to start a family before her husband and relayed that her first child arrived "six months to a year earlier than we had planned initially". Greg's view was that they never really "went through a formal process of determining when we wanted to have kids". And he would have preferred to wait at least another three or four years due to financial reasons.

New parents Nancy and David had conflicting accounts of the extent to which Nancy's pregnancy was planned. Nancy, a 32-year-old bank manager who had delayed starting a family for the first 10 years of marriage, felt that her pregnancy was an accident:

Like in *my* mind it wasn't planned. I didn't feel it was planned in my mind because I know if it was planned I would have been like okay I know this is the time you know and at the point [I became pregnant] it wasn't, like I didn't think it was the time [that I was ovulating].

In contrast, when 35-year-old David, a project manager for a general contracting company, was asked whether he and Nancy had stopped practising birth control with the

intention of conceiving a child, he replied that they had. Clearly David's account of the process differed from Nancy's:

We had decided you know if we have kids, like Nancy might say that we weren't really planning on having her when she was born but we had decided that now if it happens it'll happen. So we had talked about it but when she got pregnant she just went off the wall cause she was like how could this have happened blah blah blah.

In addition, Nancy was surprised that David hadn't mentioned that he worked out of town for several years, as she felt that his prolonged absences played a major role in their decision to delay having children.

Brad and Michelle had different versions of the degree to which Brad resisted Michelle's desire to forego parenthood. Brad was keenly aware of Michelle's strong sentiments and felt that he had relinquished his role in the decision-making process. Brad, who described himself as "laid back" and "easy going" explained that he left the decision up to his wife as he felt she would have to sacrifice more in order to have a child:

I've always viewed it, and maybe incorrectly that the decision to have kids is more Michelle's decision than mine, because she needs to go through a hell of a lot more than I do [laughter]. And to the extent that she was never prepared to have children. You know she's fairly focused on a career. I wasn't going to force the issue. So, and maybe that's why we've sort of, I almost left it to her to make the decision, in a sense, because she had more of a vested interest than I. But you know, would I be happy having kids? I'm probably more that way than Michelle is in terms of yeah, that would have been okay. Do I feel disadvantaged by not [having children]? No not particularly. So again it was, I almost defaulted my vote to her.

Brad's account focused on his lack of resistance; Michelle's took another direction.

According to Michelle when Brad turned 30 he had a "crisis" and started questioning

their intention to forego parenthood. She felt his reservations were relatively strong, and she agreed to have a child because she “felt it was important to him”. However the pregnancy resulted in a miscarriage.

Interviewing both partners enables one to capture the similarities and differences in couples’ accounts of the decision-making process. Exploring the shared stories and differing accounts of these couples as they engage in the decision-making process highlights a new dimension of reproductive decision-making. These differing accounts also demonstrate that reproductive decision-making is a complex phenomenon. For most of the couples faced with decisions such as whether or when to have children, the process was not a straightforward one.

#### *Shaun’s and Cindy’s story*

Shaun’s and Cindy’s accounts demonstrate the complexity of the reproductive decision-making process. While Shaun and Cindy, a newlywed couple, identified themselves as undecided about children at the time of their interviews, prior to marriage Cindy, a 31-year-old interior designer, felt certain that she did not want children. Her husband Shaun, a 30-year-old massage therapist, relayed one of their early conversations:

When Cindy and I met...six years ago and we started to get serious she right away, she said if you plan on having kids...break up with me now cause I’m not having kids.

Although Shaun had always assumed that he would have children, initially he was not concerned as he felt that he would be able to persuade Cindy later:

Right, so then for the first three years of our relationship it was just always, and I was always like well I mean I don't care right now, it doesn't matter, but if the time comes I'll change her mind kind of thing.

When later came Cindy still hadn't changed her mind. Shaun was unwilling to commit to childlessness and a temporary break-up ensued. Cindy, who classified herself as a "dominating" person, described their decision-making process as follows:

Well it was weird because at first I was like no, no, no. And Shaun was like well I totally want kids and you know, he was like, well why don't you want them? And I remember I think it was weird because also before we got married, oh it was like three years before that, no four years you know, we broke up for a while. And that was one of [the] things is because I didn't want to have kids. So why be with somebody who you know isn't going to do that for you right? So it was one of the items that was you know at a dispute at that time.

As both Shaun and Cindy were unwilling to compromise, they ended the relationship.

This was short-lived as they later re-united when Shaun had a change of heart:

Then, he sort of totally did a reversal and said he didn't want them anymore. He said no, *I am totally not having kids*. [I thought] okay, what's going on, great, okay. But then I'm like, "well maybe I do, right?" And it's like "oh my goodness, here we go, right?"

Eventually Shaun and Cindy were married. Shaun described how their intentions shifted in the time leading up to the wedding:

So since then over the years and stuff um she's a little more wanting to have kids and I'm, and I always wanted to have kids, and I'm a *lot* less not wanting right? So we're kinda um so um we got married just this past October so that's always the next question for everybody is when are you having kids?

Shaun explained that he now had reservations about having children. His current concerns centered on the unequal division of labour in their household:

...I do all the cooking, she doesn't cook, I'm kind of the house guy. That kind of thing so I take care of the dog, I walk the dog, I feed the dog, I pick up after the dog. She just comes home and collapses at the end of the day and then I cook and take care of her....So that's kind of the way our house works so I *feel* that you know one day when we do have kids it's all gonna be on *me*...

Perhaps Shaun's most recent concerns account for his more moderate stance on parenthood. However, he was careful to clarify that his decision applied to the present:

Okay um I find myself lately, I just tell people when they ask these days if I had to decide *today* for the rest of my life I would choose not to have kids.

When Cindy was asked whether she had made a decision about children her initial reply also indicated that more than likely she would not have children, "It's like you know I have to say it's 70 percent no, if I had to give you a percentage". As the interview progressed it was clear that Cindy was more ambivalent than her 70 percent "no" suggested. Cindy described how lately she brought up the topic of children more than her husband:

And I, maybe it's because, before I never mentioned anything and maybe I hate to say that you know you go, you think about the biological clock, but maybe it is in the back of my mind, clicking in and I don't even know it's happening. Because I notice kids on TV more, I notice....certain children and how parents react to their kids? And I know that I am making decisions in my head how I would deal with kids, my own kids.

While Shaun and Cindy were having difficulty making a commitment to parenthood,

Shaun felt that more than likely they would have children sometime in the future:

Yeah, I mean I definitely you know...I'm very at the moment not having kids, I'm just, it would be the most amazing thing ever – like I don't think there could be anything better than that. So I don't belittle the fact that you know I don't think about having kids, but I think you know eventually if everything goes the way things are gonna go we'll probably have kids. But I can see us really, really seriously not having kids for a long time, like late thirties, that kind of thing.

While Shaun and Cindy were currently undecided about children, Shaun predicted that similar to other life decisions he would “pass it on to Cindy whether we’re going to”:

I can see in the next two, three years Cindy’s gonna say okay. It’ll be her, I *know* it’ll be her, it won’t be me. She’ll just say I wanna have kids. So if two, three years comes by and she doesn’t do that, then we probably aren’t having kids. And I’m a little worried maybe that she, two, three years she decided she wants kids and I decide I definitely don’t want them um but that’s the thing, I mean I’d do it anyway, just for her so....yeah it’s interesting, I honestly think, cause so many other of our decisions in life are just does she want to, because I’m, I’m easy, I’ll do whatever so yeah I’m pretty sure, I know for a fact it’ll come from her. And maybe now I’m chickening out, “oh I’m not gonna make the decision”, but I’m pretty sure it’ll come from her.

Shaun’s and Cindy’s story illustrates that trying to reach a resolution when faced with reproductive decisions can be a complicated and sometimes arduous process. The stories of the remaining couples further highlight the complex nature of reproductive decision-making.

### **Decision-making dynamics**

With few exceptions, the couples who participated in this study shared a common dynamic in their relationships. That is, at the time of the interview, or at one time during the relationship, one partner invariably had stronger feelings than their mate about children. For some couples one partner felt strongly that they did not want children, while for others one partner felt more strongly about timing issues. The strength of these participants’ convictions varied somewhat, therefore it cannot be assumed that they were

all equally certain about their views. Nevertheless, for all but three couples, one partner's feelings about children were stronger relative to their partner's feelings.

### *Whether to have children*

The first stage in the reproductive decision-making process involves attempting to resolve the issue of whether or not to have children. For eight couples, both individuals in the dyad knew they wanted to have children even before they met their current partners<sup>3</sup>. For these couples, the next step is deciding when they will have children. This part of the decision-making process will be discussed in greater detail below.

For six of the 14 couples having children was far from a pre-determined fact<sup>4</sup>. Rather, these couples went through a decision-making process in order to try and determine whether they would have children at all. What is striking about this group is that five of the six couples did not intend to have children and in these five cases the female partners invariably held stronger convictions than their husbands did. Most of the women in this group were what Houseknecht calls "early articulators" (1978:384). That is they knew from a very early age that they did not want children. Glenda, a 44-year-old elementary school teacher, never had a "burning desire" for children and even at a young age was fairly confident that she would not have children. As the oldest of four girls she

---

<sup>3</sup> One participant in this group, Sheldon, had a child that was the result of an unplanned pregnancy in a previous relationship. He lived with the child for two years and then moved to another part of the country. He and his current partner lived common-law and did not have any children together although they planned to have a family in the future. They are classified as a couple planning to have children. Although the male partner had some early experience with parenthood, the child was not a part of his daily life. Therefore, as a couple, they had to rely on their assumptions of what their future life as parents would be like.

<sup>4</sup> One participant, Jill, had two children from an earlier marriage. Even prior to her first marriage she knew that she wanted children. However, when she met her second husband, James, she was unsure about having more children.

never babysat her younger siblings or any other children and prided herself on the fact that she had never changed a diaper. When she met her future husband she made it clear at the outset that she did not see children in her future:

Um, I think we probably talked about it even before we were married just briefly because I had never hidden my views that I didn't really see myself having kids.

Later in the interview when asked who normally initiated the conversations about children she replied:

I'd say it was probably him that got it started. You know I probably would never have brought it up! I have to be honest I know...I'm more, I'm more sure on my end than John ever will be I think.

In contrast to Glenda, John, who felt that his absence of a strong desire for children was one of the reasons they chose to remain childless, was initially relatively neutral about having children, or as he described it, "closer to being on the fence".

Michelle and Brad, the couple who suffered a miscarriage and then decided to remain childless, provide another example where one partner feels more strongly about children than the other. Michelle, a 41-year-old upper level manager in a large oil and gas company, was certain from a fairly young age that she would not have children. She described herself as very "independent" and "career oriented" and explained that she was "afraid" that if she had gotten pregnant she would not be viewed by her peers as serious about her career and probably would have been passed up for promotions.

While Michelle and Brad were "fairly convinced" early on in their relationship that children were not part of their future, Brad sensed that Michelle was "never prepared to have children", though he felt more ambivalent:



I wasn't strong on it either way particularly. Oh certainly when I was younger I was more stronger on that I never wanted kids, as I got older it had some appeal but again I wasn't going to force the issue.

Brad, similar to his counterpart John, put himself in the neutral camp. A self-described "easy going guy", he remarked that he never felt a "burning in my soul to have lots of kids". However he was not averse to becoming a father either:

I kind of like my [childfree] life. Having said that I'd love life as a parent too. I could go both ways.

Another couple in this group both identified themselves as not planning to have children, however it was apparent that the female partner spoke more vehemently than her husband did. Trisha and Jake had discussed their feelings prior to getting married and both agreed that they probably wouldn't have children. Twenty-nine-year-old Trisha, whose mother suffered from postpartum depression, took on childcare responsibilities for her younger brother from the age of nine. She explained that she had already raised a child and felt strongly that she did not want to do it again. From the moment she met her future husband she had "never wavered" on her commitment to remain childless and remarked that she "would totally support Jake if he decided to go get a vasectomy tomorrow—totally 100 percent." When asked when they would make a final decision about children she stated, "Well I think we've already made it." Trisha pointed out that her husband was more hesitant to commit to childlessness as he strongly suspected that her "biological clock" might start ticking:

I think Jake's a bit more hesitant to make a decision than I am, I think. Just because he always says, "Oh well, wait till you're 35 and your biological clock is done".

Twenty-nine-year-old Jake commented that when he first met Trisha in his early twenties one of the “attractions” was the fact that Trisha was not interested in having children. However, he later went on to mention that at the time he had “no idea” of the “true meaning” of a biological clock:

So as I’ve grown older and wiser, I understand that all those logical feelings can be for naught, when the clock kicks in.

Jake’s conviction of the power and inevitability of the biological clock caused him remain cautious about committing to permanent childlessness. Trisha, on the other hand, did not give much credence to the biological clock and as a result felt more strongly that they would remain childfree.

Even for the couple who made a final decision not to have children through sterilization, the female partner initially felt more strongly about foregoing parenthood. Prior to getting married, Mark and Joanne were “leaning towards not having kids”. At that time Joanne was severely hearing impaired and as a result she firmly believed that she should not have children. Because she sensed that she felt more strongly about this than her husband she concluded that she should be the one to undergo the sterilization surgery:

Well I...decided to get my tubes tied because I was the one, at that time even, I knew he didn’t want kids but I felt even more forceful at that time that with me being deaf I definitely should not have kids. So I just thought it should be me. And ah even though it’s probably the more difficult operation kind of thing but it was no big deal really. But I just, it was about me. And I think I had it in the back of my head a little wee bit that if he changed his mind down the road I didn’t want him to be peed off at me because he got a vasectomy.

For the five couples who did not plan to have children or were currently undecided about children, the women had much stronger sentiments about children than did their partners. However, for the sixth couple in this group, who later went on to have a child, the male partner felt more strongly about having children. In this case, Jill's mild ambivalence to having a child may have been partially due to the fact that she had two children from her previous marriage and was in her late thirties when she married her current husband. James, a chiropractor who had no children from his previous marriage, felt that having children was the "societal norm". A self-described "take charge type of guy" he made it clear when he began seeing Jill that he wanted to have a family:

And um, you know it's not like it came out right away, but one of the things when I started seeing Jill that, and her coming from a previous marriage as well, that, it is right off the bat, I said it is important, I would like to have a family. And with her age, I think that, her age, she's four years older than me, it was one of the issues that we sort of talked about.

James explained that while Jill was not averse to having another baby they "rushed the child thing" due to her age. Jill also felt that James' strong desire for children was important to the continuation of their relationship:

So well probably then with us it was almost from the beginning of dating. Because um you know I knew that he had wanted children because he had never had children before. And it was something that he wondered if I would ever want to have children. So we talked about that right from the beginning. And I knew that that was a big part of our relationship....

After enduring two miscarriages Jill became concerned about her ability to conceive a child, and wondered whether James should be with someone who could give him the child that he wanted so badly:

You know when you really think that okay you want this child so bad, and then you've had two losses and then you think is it ever going to happen? And maybe I am too old and am I of any use to this person? So it's things like that too. You know you just think well maybe this person should have found someone younger....

Now a stay-at-home mother, she never imagined that she would desire more children.

But as the relationship developed Jill began "feeling very maternal" and wanted to become pregnant quickly:

You know and since I knew that [a child] was something that he really wanted and then for me it was just like I want it now. I never thought I would have wanted it, you know.

#### *When to have children*

As mentioned above, for eight couples both individuals had already decided that they wanted to have children one day, even before meeting their current partners. As a result, when these participants became couples, this part of the decision-making process was a relatively smooth and effortless one. It was merely a matter of making their intention to have children known to their partner. As their partner already felt the same way, discussing whether or not to have children was redundant.

Most of the individuals in this group had never wavered on their assumption that they would have children one day. Many described having children as something that is "expected", "assumed", "just the normal thing to do", a "societal norm", or "a part of marriage". Several went so far as to say that they were "programmed" to have children. These participants did not question whether or not to have children but rather having children was taken for granted.

As all of the participants in these eight couples knew they wanted children before meeting their current partner, the reproductive decision-making process entailed trying to resolve *when* to have children. At the time of the interviews, three couples had not engaged in any concrete discussions about when they would have children. In fact, they had not moved much beyond agreeing to have children one day. Perhaps this was because their relationships were relatively new. These couples had only been married or living common-law from eight months to one year at the time of the interviews.

The remaining five couples had moved on to discuss the timing of children in concrete terms. Similar to the couples deciding whether or not to have children, one partner in the dyad was more certain about the issue at hand — namely, that they were ready to start a family. In all but one case it was the women who had stronger convictions. David remarked that he was “always ready” to have children and wanted to start a family shortly after getting married, however Nancy, the bank manager, wanted to wait until she was more established in her career:

Cause I was always the person that I would have probably five [kids] by now if I [could]. So I always wanted kids and she was more the career person, wanted to wait.

For the remaining couples, the women felt more strongly that they were ready to start a family than their husbands were. For example, 28-year-old Kelley, the participant who pleaded with Allan to change the start date, said that she always “loved babies, loved kids”. While she and Allan had agreed to start having children at age 32, she had a strong desire to begin much sooner than that:

We used to say that like 32 would be a great age, yeah. [laughs]. That's not going to happen because we've been married for three years and I was thinking 32 to me seems like a lot, like we got married at 25, so it just seems 32, that's just *so* long in my like the wanting of kids right now, it's just something that I cannot wait for.

Allan, on the other hand, felt that "when it happens, it'll happen":

You know I'm fairly laid back anyways, so and like I said it was always just kind of I assumed that one day I would have kids, but I never really thought about it as far as like, game plan, or time frames, or anything like that. Or, I've never felt that I really need to be, you know I need to have a child in my life right now.

### **The decision-making dance**

It is apparent that for all of the couples who had grappled with the issue of whether or when to have children, one partner in the dyad had stronger sentiments than the other partner. The question remains then, what implications does this dynamic have for the decision-making process?

#### *Leaders and followers*

The metaphor of a dance can be used to describe and understand how the decision-making process played out for the couples in this study. In order to move across the dance floor one partner becomes the leader and one the follower. If the follower provides little or no resistance, the couple continues to move across the dance floor in unison. However, if both partners wish to lead, and pull in opposite directions, the dance comes to a standstill. In like fashion, in the reproductive decision-making process, one partner led while the other followed. If this did not occur, movement towards a decision was stalled. For instance, if both partners provided equally strong resistance in opposite

directions a mutual decision was not reached until one partner agreed to yield to the other. While one can easily visualize an alternative arrangement where couples move through the decision-making process in a more egalitarian manner, this was not the case for the couples in this study.

It is not surprising that for these couples the partner who took the lead in the decision-making process was also the partner who felt more strongly about whether or when to have children. This is consistent with Zvonkovic's (1996) research suggesting that respondents who felt more strongly about the issue at hand had more of a say in the decision. As discussed above, in many cases it was the female partner who held firmer convictions about children than her partner. However, in two cases the gender dynamics were inverted and it was the men who were more certain about having children than their partners.

At the time of the interviews many of these women had successfully coaxed their partners into following their lead. It is important to note that while this implies that these participants set out in a pre-meditated and conscious fashion to sway their partners, I suggest that this was not always the case. Rather the degree to which an intentional and concentrated effort is required on the part of the leader depended at least partially upon the willingness of the follower to comply with the leader's wishes. In other words, the ability of the leader to get their partner moving in the same direction partly depended upon the degree of resistance and hesitation put forth by the follower. The amount of resistance from followers ranged from almost none; to ambivalence and hesitation; to strong opposition. In each case an equal or greater amount of effort on the part of the leader was required if the dance was to continue in the direction set out by the leader. In

some cases the leader was required to do very little coaxing and in others a fair bit of negotiating was necessary in order to obtain the follower's compliance.

In some cases the follower had no major objections to the leader's strong sentiments and as a result relatively little negotiating or discussion was required in the decision-making process. For example, Mark, a 39-year-old utility worker, had a family history of severe epilepsy. Although his sister chose to have children despite the risks, he was very concerned about having an epileptic child. When his wife Joanne, the participant who was hearing impaired, expressed to him that she was seriously considering having a tubal ligation, Mark readily agreed. He characterized the decision as follows, "So [the operation was] her choice and I whole-heartedly went along with that."

Forty-year-old Jill, the participant who had two children from her previous marriage, had some reservations about having a child with James, her current husband. In addition to her concerns about her age, she was apprehensive about becoming pregnant before marriage, and about James' readiness for fatherhood:

And so it was something too I would ask James, "Are you sure you're ready for this?" Like cause you, you know before we met, he used to go out quite [a bit] with his friends.... "Are you sure this is something you want to do?"... "Like this is it. This is serious you know".

James also discussed Jill's reservations about becoming pregnant prior to getting married and described how he tried to alleviate her concerns:

That's one thing, we hadn't been married prior [to getting pregnant], which was sort of a concern, you know she just thought she was a baby producer, you know, and I said no you know I wouldn't have committed to that, the initial steps of having this baby...it was just a matter of timing.



Jill went on to state that “it was really maternal feelings that came over me” to explain how she knew she wanted to have another child. She went on to enthusiastically embrace her pregnancy and her third child.

A strong leader and a hesitant follower characterize the decision-making dynamic of the other couples. These were mildly to moderately reluctant followers who held reservations about taking their partner’s lead. Sam, the writer, remarked that his wife, Sue, was ready for both marriage and parenthood before he was. He wanted to hold off until he was in a career that was more stable. Sam also wondered if he would be “good at fatherhood”. He remarked that he was “never prepared” for a child, and felt that if their first child had not come as a surprise he may have endlessly delayed having children:

You know [we] were to a certain extent, as Sue probably explained, caught off guard. You know it was a year early. But I think for me it would have always been a year early. Because even though we said next [year], when next year came I probably would have thought, well next year. So, I don’t think it would have mattered when, no matter if we had pinpointed the day, I would have been caught off guard. No, I was never ready until it was there and I had to deal with it.

John, like Sam, also had some reservations but put up little resistance to his wife Glenda’s lead. While John valued family and was concerned that he would later regret not having children, he felt that Glenda’s “fairly strong desire not to have children” combined with his lack of passion about parenthood contributed to their decision not to have children. He described their decision-making dance in the following way:

I think I started on the fence and then moved off in the direction of not having children. I don't think she was ever on the fence *really*, might have been for some brief periods. So I think her influence, um how strongly, how she felt about that, how she would characterize that, my respect for her um significant part in this whole decision was one reason. You know so if I had felt really passionately and strongly about [having children], and that's what I was looking for. For me that's, that had to be there....Maybe that was the wrong assumption but for me this had to feel like a passion and something that you really want to do. If I had had *that* we probably would have had a much rockier debate and process and all the rest of it. Or I might have imposed my view and said you know I know how strongly you feel but you know I feel just as strongly in the opposite direction you know, so we need to talk about this more. That wasn't there and so it was easy for me to come off the fence in her direction. So I think the absence of my strong desire was a contributor [to not having children].

When followers like John and Sam put forth only mild resistance to their partners' strong lead, the decision-making dance continued in the general direction of the leader's wishes.

In situations where followers put forth moderate resistance, the dance did not necessarily go according to the leader's plans. This was the case for at least four couples. Three of the couples were in agreement that they wanted to have children and the fourth couple did not intend to have children. In each case the leader was ready to make a final decision and therefore wanted to speed up the process. The follower on the other hand was hesitant to take the next step and consequently wanted to slow things down. In circumstances such as these, where followers felt that the pace of the dance was too quick, they resisted their partner's strong lead in an effort to slow things down. The opposition put forth by these followers had the intended effects and they were able to successfully stall their partners, at least temporarily.

Marilyn and Jerry agreed early in their marriage that they would not have children until they had completed their university degrees. However, after Marilyn's experience in nursing school, she became very "excited about babies" and told her husband that she

wanted to start a family as soon as possible. Jerry explained that this “key experience” prompted his wife to try and persuade him to start a family sooner than they had planned:

...she patiently just kept coming home and saying, “I want one.” “Can we have one?” “I want one”.

As the leader pushed to speed up the pace, the follower resisted by dragging his feet and slowing down the process. While both Jerry and Marilyn wanted to ensure that they were financially able to support a child, Jerry, as the “primary breadwinner”, was not prepared to go along with Marilyn’s wishes to start sooner than they planned. He felt that they should be “responsible” and not expand their family to include children until they were able to “properly support” them. He described their decision-making dance in the following way:

Well I think that...the pediatrics rotation that she did really, cause she was ready before [graduation] and she was even considering, well, I could graduate with just a diploma, I don’t need the bachelor of nursing, and you know and I could finish early and I’m saying no, c’mon let’s just, we owe it to the little child we’re going to bring into the world to you know make sure that we can, that we are developing ourselves also and let’s just stick out our plan and not falter near the finish line.

Some followers slowed the pace set by their leaders more than others. Two followers delayed the process by approximately one year. However, one participant stalled for considerably longer. Nancy, the participant whose husband, David, wanted to have children “instantly” after they were married, had strong reservations about starting a family. She wanted to establish her career and was also concerned about being a “single mom” as, at the time, David worked for extended periods away from home. As they were married for 10 years before they had their first child, David had almost given up hope:

**You know the 10 years we were married and we didn't have kids, I basically knew that she wasn't ready to have them. I wasn't going to push it any more and I just accepted it. Deep down I wanted to have kids but um, the longer you wait after you're married not to have kids the harder it gets.**

**For the fourth couple who did not intend to have children, Jake and Trisha, the follower (in this case Jake) was reluctant to take his wife's lead and make a permanent decision to forego parenthood. Trisha, the participant who remarked that she would fully support her husband if he decided to get a vasectomy, was ready to make a final decision but she knew that Jake wanted to delay making a decision for several years due to his concerns about her "biological clock". Trisha explained that Jake was hesitant to get a vasectomy because he wanted to wait until she was a certain age and her clock had finished ticking.**

**In several cases the leader of the decision-making dance was also the one who planned other areas of the couple's life. Kelley described herself as the "controller of social plans". Allan, one of the participants who felt that he didn't really participate in deciding when to have a child, described Kelley as a "planner":**

**And you know it, like it, she, Kelley's a person that when she gets an idea in her head, she's driven by it....she's a planner and she always needs to be planning something and so the same is true with her life.**

**Another follower, Sam, the participant who felt that he was never really prepared to have a child, also characterized his wife as a "planner". When asked whether he felt that the decisions they made about children were made in the same way that they made other big decisions Sam replied:**

I'd say it's exactly the same. Sue's the planner. And once she can convince the rational side of me that it's the right decision, I buy in....And in a way you know Sue planned out the course of our, our life you know....So that sort of spans other aspects of our relationship.

It appears that at least for some of these couples the partner who felt most strongly about whether or when to have children was also the leader in areas that extended beyond reproductive issues.

### *Persuasion and resistance strategies*

At the time of the interviews all of the leaders appeared to have partners who were following their lead, at least for the time being. However, as evidenced by the dialogues presented in this chapter, the decision-making dance was not always a smooth and effortless one. Rather, participants' accounts of the dance reflect the ways in which they attempted to ensure that their wishes were met or at least considered. For most couples each partner's sentiments rarely mirrored their mate's, therefore various degrees of coaxing by the leader and resistance by the follower occurred.

The most common form of resistance employed by the followers was stalling. While the leader was ready to make a final decision, these followers were not. Therefore, as noted earlier, they utilized a variety of tactics that completely stalled or at least slowed down the decision-making dance.

In cases where followers responded with complete agreement to their partner's wishes very little coaxing was required. However, as many followers had some reservations about whether or when to have children, they were not so easily and

willingly led. Rather they required various degrees of coaxing from their partners before they yielded. Coaxing ranged from subtle hints to outright pleading. In cases where the follower provided moderate to strong resistance, or where the leader felt very passionately, more forceful methods were used in an attempt to get the follower's cooperation. In situations where the follower was only slightly hesitant or the leader was less passionate, the coaxing was much milder. The notion of coaxing is echoed in Gerson's research on men and the transition to fatherhood. Men who were reluctant to become fathers had partners who employed "strategic nudging" (Gerson 1993:93) in order to overcome the opposition these men had to parenthood.

One of the more subtle ways that leaders coaxed their partners was to let them know of their feelings in a joking manner. Nancy, the bank manager, knew that David wanted to start a family right after getting married. She explained that David never put any "pressures" on her, but instead used to joke in such a way that made it clear that having children soon was important to him:

Nancy: I always knew he wanted kids right away, and that was that. You know what I mean?

Shelley: Yeah. It was out on the table.

Nancy: Yes. So it was, there was never any like, you know, and he jokes right, about that you know he'd get divorced from me if he didn't have kids early hey? And that's just joking, you know. And, he'd always said, he'd have to take his wheel chair to the park to pick up his kids cause he's so old now. [laughter] I knew he was just joking. But of course I'm sure you know, you don't say things unless there is going to be a thought of truth to it, like you know, a little bit of truth to it. So he might have been saying it in terms of, you know I really want to have kids, so the sooner the better kind of thing.

Clearly Nancy recognized that although David was “just joking” his lighthearted comments veiled a more serious issue –that he wanted to start a family.

Jill, the 40-year-old newlywed mother, had reservations about becoming pregnant before getting married. She believed that marriage was an important component of family life, however James did not feel it was necessary to get married before starting a family. Although she followed James’ strong desire to have a child she felt that “you have to be married to have that whole family scenario” so she joked with him about getting married:

And that’s what I used to bug him about too. You know like okay, I’m pregnant now so are you going marry me?

While Jill followed James’ lead in deciding to have a child, she led the discussions about marriage. Jill and James illustrate that the partner leading reproductive decision-making is not necessarily the one to lead in other types of decisions.

Sue, the participant who organized goal-setting sessions with her husband Sam and was ready to start a family before he was, used a different coaxing technique. When asked to describe some of their early discussions about children she explained that the topic came up when they were writing down their future goals:

So one of the goals for me was having children. And I don’t remember if it was on Sam’s list, but I think for me it was about fourth out of five, something like that at that point.

Sue used these five-year planning sessions as a venue for communicating to Sam that having children was moving higher on her priority list. It was a subtle way of testing the waters on how he felt about starting a family.

Some leaders were very passionate about the issue at hand and used more direct methods of coaxing their partners into taking their lead. Kelley, the participant who desperately wanted a child, had been married to Allan for three years. Kelley had assumed that when she was ready Allan would be “right there with me”. When she discovered that he was not ready she began negotiating the time frame for having children. Allan agreed to start in January, 2000 but that wasn’t soon enough for Kelley. She felt her husband should compromise further and wondered, “what month are you going to meet me half way here so we can start trying?” Even though Kelley explained that she didn’t want to “force” her husband into anything, she pleaded with him for an earlier start date. Although Kelley faced some resistance from her partner, her lead was stronger than his resistance, and as a result she was able to considerably speed up the dance. Although the follower adhered to his deadline, this was still several years earlier than initially planned.

### **Implications of the decision-making dance**

Some of the previous research on decision-making suggests that if one partner is perceived to have a larger influence in making a decision they are also conferred with the responsibilities resulting from the outcome of that decision. For example, Zvonkovic’s (1996) study of work and family decisions revealed that when husbands maintained that it was their wife’s decision to engage in paid work after having children, they also felt that it was their wife’s responsibility to find childcare arrangements. In a similar vein, some research suggests that when reluctant men are nudged into parenthood by their



female partners, they increase their ability to opt out of childcare and housework (Gerson 1993). Women, on the other hand, find themselves strategically disadvantaged in the subsequent division of childcare work (McMahon 1995). Gerson describes how men negotiate with their partners in order to avoid the “dirtiest” tasks of childcare:

Because reluctant [male] breadwinners were nudged into parenthood, they retained the leverage to avoid extensive involvement. They struck a bargain with their wives: in exchange for consenting to have a child, they would be excused from the more demanding aspects of child rearing (1993:99).

The observation noted by Gerson was echoed by one participant in this study who felt that if one partner makes a decision they are also responsible for the outcomes of that decision. The consequences of being nudged into parenthood were apparent to Nancy, although in her case it was her husband David who had done the coaxing. Nancy felt that if she had let David talk her into having a child earlier than she wanted she would have expected him to alter his work schedule to accommodate a child:

Nancy: And you know it is amazing in terms of, like I said this to David the other day, you know for us, for me too, like I don't, I'm so relieved that we waited, because we both knew this was what we want, and we are both around to take, in terms of if we have to leave early from work, we're willing to do that because each of us can do it now. We're okay with that. Like I think if it would have been earlier, I would have had a tough time saying [at work] “I've got to go”.

Shelley: Right. Because you weren't ready.

Nancy: No. “You're the one that wanted it, you go.” I think there might have been more of that rather than the fifty-fifty kind of thing.

Jo Owens, in her memoir on motherhood called, “Add kids, stir briskly or how I learned to love my life”, explained that on a whim she and her partner had engaged in unprotected sex. The risk-taking was her idea as was the decision to keep the child when

she discovered that she was pregnant. As a result she felt that the outcomes of that decision were also her responsibility:

It was like when you really want to go to see a play, but your partner isn't so keen on it. But you *really* want to go, so you drag your partner off to this play, and it's just awful....It's the worst play you've ever paid good money to see. And guess what. It was *your* idea. Maybe your partner is sweet enough not to rub it in, but it was still your idea. Well, much as Brian loved his son, whenever anything went wrong, mmmm, what's that ugly smell, wafting through the room like burnt toast –oh, yeah, *eau de 'Your idea'* (Owens 1999:52).

While in this study only Nancy articulated the implications stemming from one partner leading decision-making, it was apparent that several participants attempted to avoid taking responsibility for being leaders in the decision-making dance. While it was not clear whether Glenda, the teacher, recognized the implications of being a leader, it was clear that she felt more strongly about remaining childless. However, she did not want to be held accountable for the outcome:

Yeah, so that's kind of where John and I've got to you see? I was sort of there anyway and he could have pushed me over, and that's what I've said to him a few times, he said "Well you know I could have gone, I could have...had children" and I said "But you weren't forceful *enough*." I said you were, he goes "Well no because I knew you didn't". I said "No, don't push it back at *me*. I told you before that I was ambivalent, I could have, but you would have had, it would have taken some more strength from *you* to say this is really important and I, I find we're not dealing with this, what's going to happen."

Glenda's statement demonstrates her reluctance to take responsibility for the fact that they did not have children.

Shaun, the massage therapist, invoked his easy-going disposition to explain why Cindy would probably have the final say about children. However, he also confessed that in passing the decision to Cindy, he might have been "chickening out" of making the

decision himself. Although Shaun was a follower, it appears that similar to Glenda he was hesitant to take responsibility for making a final decision. It is difficult to know how many other participants felt this way as this was not explored in the interviews. However, an unwillingness for one partner to step forward and take responsibility for making a final decision may help to understand why many of these couples had not reached a final decision about parenthood.

### **Gender and the decision-making dance**

It is also worth exploring the ways in which gender played out in the decision-making dance. Nine of the 11 couples who had engaged in concrete discussions about whether or when to have children had women as leaders and men as followers. This contradicts the work of Zvonkovic (1996) concluding that the work and family decisions made by married couples more often reflect the wishes of the husband. Jerry, the computer scientist, insightfully articulated the reason why many participants (both men and women) stated that it was the woman who had the final say in reproductive matters:

Jerry: Yeah when it comes down to it you know, she's the one to grow the baby in her body so I would of course always defer to her.

Shelley: Yeah, so she'd just sort of make the final, final say on it.

Jerry: Oh obviously, the only say.

Shelley: The only say, *the* say.

Jerry: The say yeah, but except that I could tell her if it was too early I think I could probably say I think that we're rushing this, I think we would be rushing into it, but to actually finally go ahead you know, she would be the final arbiter.

Clearly this aspect of the decision-making dance, in which women were leaders and men were followers, played out along stereotypically gendered lines. Typically, women are portrayed as instigators in the decision to have children. Specifically, women are presumed to have a strong desire for children while men are characterized as reluctant partners who must be persuaded to “settle down” and embrace the responsibilities of family life. It may be true that for most of the couples in this study women were leading the decision-making dance, while the men deferred to their partners’ wishes. However, this does not necessarily mean that the women were leading their partners towards parenthood. In five cases women felt strongly that they did *not* want to have children and it was the men who were less certain about childlessness. John, married to Glenda, the elementary school teacher, described some of the reservations that he had about foregoing parenthood:

I would say the other factor for me...as selfish as it might seem, has been kind of my mental picture of what old age looks like. And I like family, and I like a lot of the family traditions, you know the Christmases and the things like that, and my mental picture of that without children and without any of my extended family alive any more didn’t look all that rosy. You know, I thought well, I just ah see just Glenda and I, is that *enough* to sustain a relationship?

Later in the interview John outlined some of the reasons that they eventually decided to remain childless—one being Glenda’s strong opposition to parenthood:

Glenda’s fairly strong desire not to have children was an important reason. Um you know, I’m sure she said this to you but the way I characterize her view on this is that it just, there’s no natural maternal instincts. I mean it has never at any point in her womanhood had a significant drive to picture children as part of her world and um I knew that when I first met her. And um you know, I was I would say closer to being on the fence.

In addition, of the five couples who were parents, in two cases the husband was ready for parenthood before their partners were. David, the father who wanted very much to start a family right after marriage but waited 10 years before Nancy was ready, remarked that if he had married someone else he may have had more children:

I was always ready [to start a family]. I like who knows if I was in a different relationship married to someone else I might have three or four kids by now. I was always, the joke was I was always wanting to have kids, right from the first year of marriage so yeah.

David's eagerness to become a father and John's reservations about childlessness call into question stereotypical beliefs about men's reluctance to enter parenthood. As well, Nancy's resistance to having a child and Glenda's strong opposition to motherhood, undermine the assumption that all women long for family life. These findings are consistent with Machung (1989) who argues that while the perception is that women have a stronger desire for children, men often want families just as much as women.

This chapter explored the dynamics of the reproductive decision-making process. These participants' accounts of decision-making indicate that in most cases women felt more strongly about children than did their partners. The implications of having a "leader" and a "follower" in decision-making were discussed as well as the ways in which gender was implicated in this process. Another issue that remains to be explored is the extent to which this decision-making process resulted (or did not result) in a definitive decision about whether and/or when to have children. Therefore, the following chapter will focus on the reproductive outcomes that evolved from the decision-making dance.

## **Chapter Four: Decision-making outcomes**

In the initial stages of this research, as I noted in Chapter Two, the strategy was to interview couples who had made a deliberate “decision” to have children or to remain childless. The assumptions underlying the sampling strategy were that reproductive decision-making is a methodical process involving a certain degree of planning, and more importantly for the purposes of this chapter, that participants have the desire and/or the ability to reach a definitive decision and that ultimately they will do that. The term “decision” implies that a firm resolution has been reached, usually after some consideration. However, as the findings in the previous chapter indicate, many of the couples had not in fact reached a firm decision as to whether or when they would have children. The decision-making process, characterized by resistance and persuasion strategies, did not result in a “decision” or definitive outcome. Rather for many couples the issues remained unsettled, the process ongoing, and the outcome subject to change.

### **The “decision” making continuum**

In the following pages I will analyze the variety of “outcomes” resulting from the “decision-making” process. While the previous chapter highlights the negotiation process faced by many couples when confronted with the question of whether or when to have children, this chapter will focus on the tentative nature of the “decisions” that resulted from that process. In terms of temporal order, the decision-making dance is the

process leading up to the outcome, while the decision-making continuum represents couples' decisions or intentions at the time of the interviews.

The resolutions reached by these couples lie on a continuum that ranged from a permanent commitment to forego parenthood to a deliberate effort to conceive a child. In between the two poles were various intentions that had not developed into permanent decisions. These were characterized by less stability than the decisions at each end of the continuum. Given the contested and complex nature of the decision-making dance, it is not surprising that the majority of these couples were unwilling or unable to reach a final decision about whether or when to have children.

### **Outcomes of the decision-making process**

As discussed earlier, five of the fourteen couples, at one time or another, felt some uncertainty as to whether or not they would have children. The results of the decision-making process for these couples are as follows: one couple identified themselves as currently undecided; one couple decided to remain childless and had surgery to finalize their decision; and three couples were not planning to have children but had not taken any steps to prevent pregnancy permanently.

At the time of the interviews nine couples had decided that they would have children. Of the nine couples, four identified themselves as planning to have children, and five couples already had children. For the couples who knew that they would have children, the decision was not whether to have children, but rather when to have children.

### *Final and permanent decisions*

Four couples made what can be termed a firm and final decision about children. Joanne and Mark made a permanent commitment to childlessness, while the other three couples (Jerry and Marilyn; James and Jill; Allan and Kelley) made a firm decision to start trying to conceive.

Joanne and Mark felt that the odds were high that they would have a disabled child as both families had a history of genetically transmitted diseases. Mark, the participant with a family history of epilepsy, witnessed his mother's severe epileptic seizures throughout his childhood. He felt that having a handicapped child was "more than we could bear" and therefore found that making the decision not to have children was relatively easy:

Um, yeah for me again I have to say that the choice not to have children was easy. It was not an earth shattering decision. I did not have to think about it hard. And definitely I think there were other decisions I think that were probably harder for me. I think buying a house could have been on par with that decision or more so.

Joanne, a 41-year-old maintenance coordinator, was hearing impaired until a recent operation restored most of her hearing. As deafness is hereditary in her family, her doctor told her at a very young age that she should probably not have children. Due mainly to their concerns about having a handicapped child, Mark and Joanne decided early on in their marriage that they wanted to forego parenthood and remain childfree for the rest of their lives. Several years later, when she was 35 years old, Joanne had a tubal ligation to permanently prevent pregnancy. She explained:

So to me it's ah once you make your decision then, essentially it was following through on the decision. Because really if you don't take that step then you're going to be forever debating it right?



Joanne's statement highlights the indeterminacy of a decision, such as one to remain childless, when a permanent step such as sterilization is not taken. Essentially, a decision not to have children is not a decision in the truest sense of the word until a permanent step is taken to prevent pregnancy. The issue remains unresolved, which means potentially the debate can be re-opened at any time. This leaves open the possibility, however small, that one or both partners may change their mind.

On the other end of the continuum were three couples who made a conscious and final decision to start having children. Making a final decision in this context means not using birth control, non with the intention of conceiving a child. Marilyn, the nurse who wanted a child after doing her maternity rotation, described the decision to start trying in the following way:

Marilyn: Well, what happened was my last year of nursing school I finished, I did nursing school in three and a half years, so what we figured out is we figured what month we could start trying to have a baby, such that Jerry would have graduated by the time I had the baby. So we decided that we could start trying in August and that would mean that the baby would be born in May.

Shelley: In May, and then he would have graduated?

Marilyn: He would have graduated if we started in August yeah. And then we decided we would start trying on our anniversary which is August 17<sup>th</sup> and that was kind of nice. And we were pretty good about, you know, like very detailed things, like I went off the pill before hand, and we stopped drinking alcohol and I stopped drinking diet Coke.

Marilyn's comment highlights the deliberate nature of the decision to intentionally conceive a child.

While these couples may have planned their first child this did not necessarily mean that both partners were certain they were making the right decision. While James, the chiropractor, was the leader in the decision to have a child, once he and Jill began trying to conceive he felt “rushed” and somewhat ambivalent about having a child:

James: You know we just, within that first year serious, I think it took about a year before you know practising without protection you know. It’s a little rushed for me, a year, and sort of in the process if it happens, it happens.

Shelley: Okay, so you could have gone either way at that point? During that first year?

James: Yeah, yeah, yeah. In fact I didn’t know what I wanted, I went through a big stage...I was in a real sort of I don’t know what I want, you know type thing, before I really settled down. Took a year.

Allan, one of the participants who felt that his wife made the decision to start a family, like James was unsure about the decision. Although Kelley was pregnant at the time of the interview, Allan was anxious about what kind of father he would be:

Because I’m one of these people that, I’m probably a little disappointed in myself, like in my interaction with my niece and nephew. I found that leading up to my sister’s first pregnancy I always thought that I was going to be a great uncle, and spend all this time with my nephew and I found that when he came around, I didn’t really have an interest in kids. And it’s only been in like in the last year or two, now that you know they speak in complete sentences and they tell you stories, that I find them even a little interesting. So that was a real disappointment for myself....And so you know I’m hoping that I’m one of those people that until you have your own kids, you don’t realize the joy in them.

### *The “non-decision” decision*

Three of the 14 couples were not planning to have children at the time they were interviewed, however they had not taken any permanent steps, such as surgical sterilization, to prevent pregnancy. All six of these participants identified themselves at

the outset of the interview as having made the decision not to have children. However, after further reflection and discussion it became quite clear that what was framed as a decision was in fact something that was subject to change in the future and therefore lacked a sense of finality. The couples were placed in this category based on their self-identification at the time of the interview and as such the category is temporally specific. For example, the two youngest participants in this group, Jake and Trisha, were careful to clarify that their decision was for the present moment. Even though Trisha, who was 29 years old, said that she would support Jake if he wanted to get a vasectomy, she recognized that potentially they could change their minds:

Right now we're pretty much not going to have them, not going to have children. But you know, you never know, things could change. But I don't think so.

John and Glenda, who were in their early forties, had been married for 16 years.

John described how their "decision" to remain childless lacked a sense of permanence that stemmed from their hesitation to undergo sterilization surgery:

Kind of every other day, or a couple times a week we would be sitting quietly talking about this and it was you know, the tail end of that period in which you know something crossed over for us. We got comfortable with the decision to not have children. And you know, I'm...misrepresenting that to be honest with you. We never, we didn't reach a definitive decision then. But we had moved in to the space that said children are *very, very* likely not part of our life. And...then we just parked it. So that felt comfortable enough that we had kind of, it wasn't ambiguous for us anymore. But I can't say that we, you know...there was no, not that much finality to it. So for me the door was always kind of open to say well, you know we might come back to this again. And the testament to that is you know, we talked about well, whew now that we've made that we can go off and have certain operations and you know, we've made the decision so there's nothing about what we might do in that area that would cause us regret. That was the acid test for me that said you know [laughter] you know, I don't think, I don't think either one of us are ready to do that. Which might just be the fact that that in itself is another stage in the process. Or it might be that we weren't *completely* shutting the door to the possibility of children.

Like the women in Currie's study who were "childless by default" (Currie 1997:237) these couples had failed to make a final and permanent decision about parenthood. However, Currie's categorization is based in part on participants' lack of conscious deliberation about motherhood. Unlike Currie's participants, varying degrees of consideration went into these participants' "decisions", although one partner may have put in more thought than the other. For these couples the intention to forego parenthood is better framed as what one participant, Brad, called a "non-decision":

Um, well again you know the decision not to have kids has almost been a non-decision to a certain extent. Again sort of not by default but [it] just sort of has evolved into not having kids.

This type of decision is not characterized by a lack of deliberation but rather by a lack of finality.

The decision not to have children while opting out of sterilization surgery is also a non-decision in another sense. If these couples wait long enough the inevitability of menopause will likely make a final decision for them. Even though Glenda and John did not intend to have children, she pointed out that physically she was still able to bear a child, although at her age she could not imagine doing so:

And ah you know, like I haven't gone through menopause either. We could still have kids but I couldn't *imagine* having kids when I'm 44.

Providing that Glenda and John continue to resist finalizing their decision through sterilization, the passage of time will transform their non-decision into a permanent decision to forego parenthood. In essence, their decision will be made for them.

Menopause will not only provide a sense of finality that was previously lacking, it will also allow them to bypass a potentially difficult stage in the decision-making process – namely a decision to undergo sterilization.

Jake and Trisha were waiting to see if another physiological function, Trisha's "biological clock", kicked in before deciding to undergo surgery:

I guess a final decision would probably be a vasectomy. That would be a final decision. So I guess, by way of saying we're waiting till we're 35...six years away. But I guess I say that because, Jake's hesitant to do it. He wants to wait until I'm a certain age. You know, the biological clock.

Jake had engaged in several conversations with a close friend about the power of a woman's "biological clock". He equated the biological clock with a strong and urgent desire to have a child and looked to this metaphor for assistance in solving their childbearing dilemma:

I also understood that Trisha has a biological clock that may or may not tick at any time from now until 40. And should that begin ticking...the conversation or the debate would be re-opened, and it would have to be. It would pretty much have to go her way wouldn't it? [laughter] And so then I would have to, so I guess the possibility of it is not necessarily in my hands.

Just as the physiological function of menopause allows a couple to avoid making a permanent and potentially difficult decision, the perception that a woman's biological clock is unpredictable and uncontrollable has the potential to do the same. While menopause finalizes the intention to remain childless, the biological clock can reverse this intention and transform it into a decision to have children. While menopause is a certainty and the biological clock is not, for these couples they both have the potential to serve the same purpose. That is, they allow a couple to bypass the process required to

make a permanent decision while placing responsibility for their decision firmly in the domain of physiology. As this domain is perceived as somewhat uncontrollable, the decision is clearly out of the couples' hands. The consequences of this will be discussed in detail in the final chapter.

At the time of the interviews three couples felt confident that they would like to have children someday, however they had not decided when they would start trying to conceive a child. These couples identified themselves as not ready to have children and were waiting for a suitable time to start trying:

I mean we've already decided [that we want children], we're just waiting for the right time, for when it's the right time.

It is also important to note that like their childless counterparts who made a "non-decision" to forego parenthood, these couples had not made an irreversible and permanent decision to become parents. As they were using birth control to prevent conception, the possibility exists that one or both partners could change their mind. Making a conscious and potentially permanent decision would involve making a deliberate effort to become pregnant by choosing not to use birth control. The intentional attempt to achieve conception is labelled as "proceptive" behaviour in the psychological literature (e.g. see Miller 1986; Miller and Pasta 1996:309).

As one couple noted it is relatively easy to express a desire to have children in the future but more difficult to commit to the final decision. Tom, a 31-year-old engineer, explained:

It was easier because it was something I knew I wanted and I didn't have to [commit] to having them tomorrow. I knew that the context of the question was not do you want them tomorrow it was do you want them. So it makes it easier to answer.

Tom's wife Anna, five years his junior, felt that she was still too young to have a child and as a result predicted that making a decision when to have children would be difficult:

Well since we actually haven't yet decided when, but we have decided that yes, it's been pretty easy to just say yeah okay we both want kids. Three years down the road he might say I'm ready and I might say no way.

There is a distinction that must be made within this group. Four participants always knew or assumed that they would have children. Craig, a 24-year-old engineering student, explained:

I don't know if I ever really thought about yea or nay but I just I guess assumed that I would have kids one day. You know I never really, I never thought any differently.

For these participants the decision to have children was not a decision in the truest sense. As they always knew that they wanted to be parents someday it was not something that required conscious deliberation. They did not give weighty consideration to the pros and cons of parenthood in order to reach a "decision". For example, when asked whether his "decision" to be a parent one day was an easy one, Tom, a newlywed, stated:

I'm not sure it was actually a decision at that point, it was just a verbalizing of something that I already felt I guess....The fact that you're kind of saying yeah I guess I do want kids and you haven't said anything for 25 years or whatever.

Tom did not frame his desire to be a parent as a decision because he always knew that he wanted to have children. For these participants making a "decision" to have children is

superfluous; parenthood is a given and as such the only issues to consider are the number and timing of children.

For the remaining two participants in this group the desire to become parents did not go unquestioned but rather wavered when they became young adults. These two women described how they began to question their childhood dreams of motherhood. Theresa, a 31-year-old nursing student who had done a lot of “personal work”, felt that her views on children were related to her personal development:

I think when I was younger, and I was a teenager I kind of um had that soap opera dream or Cinderella story like every young girl does where you meet your prince and have all your children and everything will work out perfect. Cause you just don't know, you're naive right? So you want the fairytale wedding and all that and I think I was in that dream. The funny thing was when I got into my twenties I, my whole, it was just like no I don't want children. Just you know didn't want them, don't know *why* um I don't know if maybe it was just a stage in my growth and development that I went through, it was just no I'm not interested, no time, fear probably. A lot of different things and then I think when I was, I'm 31 now, and when I was I think 28 it was just like a light came on in my head, I was like I do want children.

Eventually both of the women in this group decided that they would like to be mothers one day. While some of the participants were always certain they would have children and others had wavered, at the time of the interviews all of these couples intended to become parents in the future. What distinguishes this group of couples is that while they are firmly committed to becoming parents, the decision when to start a family has not yet been resolved.

Only time will tell whether these couples actually make a conscious decision about when to start a family. As the findings in the previous chapter suggest, the arrival of children is not always the result of a planned, methodical, and conscious decision-



making process. For example, Theresa, the nursing student who lived common-law with her boyfriend Sheldon, felt that having children was not necessarily something that one planned:

You know what, I've asked that question to almost every woman that I know who's a mother, how do you know it's the right time? And so many people have said to me you just can't plan it. I mean there is planned parenthood right, but other people are just saying you can't plan it, it just happens. I mean I know right now it would be a horrible time for us to get pregnant because I'm in school, you know financially we're just, we're able to support ourselves but we're in no position to [support] another person but, it happens and you learn to accommodate.

Of the nine couples who had "decided" to have children, three couples became pregnant with their first child sooner than they expected. Prior to having children, these three couples were trying to decide when would be the ideal time to start a family. As couples they experienced a fair amount of ambivalence and uncertainty during this process and in the end they had an experience similar to some of the mothers in Currie's study; in essence these couples "never really decided" (Currie 1988 :238) when they would have children. They did not make a decision, but rather the decision to have a child was made for them. Sue, now a mother of two, described it in the following way:

So we really, we knew we wanted children, but we didn't know that the time was right yet. So we made the decision passively.

This type of decision is "passive" as these participants felt that children were something that happened *to* them. In this sense they were not actors; rather they were acted upon. The script was not written by them but for them. Pregnancy was not perceived to be the result of any decisive action taken on the part of these couples. The perception that pregnancy was something that "just happened" allowed these couples to

avoid making a final decision when to have children. Similar to their “non-decision” counterparts without children, these parents did not make a final “decision” regarding parenthood.

Dana, the nurse and mother of three whose first child arrived six months to a year early, explained that she became pregnant sooner than she would have liked “due to birth control failure”. Greg, an engineer who always assumed that he would have children one day, stated that he and Dana did not make a “decision” when to have children:

We both agreed that we were going to have children when we got married, once we got married. So the concept was yes we did want children. Um, we ah, Dana’s probably made you aware of this, the decision was forced upon us when I was 27 and it was sooner than what I would have liked to have planned.

Previous research indicates that women who were unable to make a decision about children solved their dilemma by engaging in contraceptive risk-taking. (Currie 1988). While it is clear that Greg and Dana did not plan their first child, it is difficult to determine whether they became careless with birth control.

For the remaining two couples in this group, it was clear that they did play reproductive roulette. Nancy, the bank manager married to David, who felt that her pregnancy wasn’t “planned”, did not frame it as a decision because the process did not require her to do anything, to take any action. She did not have to make a conscious decision to become pregnant, but rather she just found herself pregnant:

But definitely, you know, yeah, it was definitely a gradual thought process and again because it was never, like I didn’t have to consciously make the decision to do something, it just happened.

Nancy, concerned that having a child would have a negative impact on her career, struggled for 10 years trying to decide when the time was right for her. In the end, unable to make a decision, she simply let fate decide:

...a couple months before Lisa was conceived it was kind of like, yeah it wouldn't be bad. Do you know what I mean? Like it wouldn't be bad to have kids, but you know I'm not really ready, I you know, there's a lot more going on at work that I'd like to do before I have, so it was like, it, I kind of more, I was leaning more, so you know if you've got the fence right, now I was definitely leaning more on the side of well let's have them soon, rather than on the side of no, right. So at the point you know was I as cautious, or careful with my timing, no....And it never was where I was like, yeah let's do it.

The decision to let fate decide was echoed in another couple's story. Sue and Sam, the couple who had goal setting sessions, had an understanding that they would not have children until they were both ready. After several years of marriage Sue felt that "if it happens, it happens", however at that time Sam was not ready to start a family. Sue remarked that when she became pregnant after engaging in unprotected sex she and Sam were both taken by surprise:

It was a real shock. So what had happened, I think it was a night where, we, when we, I wasn't on the pill, so it was always condoms. And I think we just hadn't used one, maybe it wasn't, I'm, I always know when I ovulate, so like on day 14, so I knew that I wasn't, or it must have been a thing where we didn't use one, you know, laziness, or whatever, on Sam's part. And um, and I must have been close, obviously as close to ovulation, but I hadn't realized it....So let's see um, so, we must have not used a condom and we probably thought if it happens, it happens, fine, we want children. It would be a little bit early. But we didn't, we weren't there saying this is it, you know, we're making a baby.

Like the previous couple, Sue and Sam were unable to make a final decision about the timing of children. In both cases one partner was not ready to start a family. These couples made an unconscious "decision" to deal with this uncertainty by engaging

in reproductive risk taking. As they became less vigilant in their birth control practices they essentially placed the decision in the hands of fate. Again, this type of decision has certain implications—one of which is that neither partner is responsible for the future consequences stemming from the “decision”. As pregnancy was something that just happened, and not believed to be the result of any action taken on the part of either partner, no single person is held accountable for the outcome.

The inability to make a firm decision about parenthood is shared by the parents in this group and the couples who made a “non-decision” to forego parenthood. While the outcomes differ (the former group of couples are childless and the latter group have children), none of the couples made what can be termed a permanent decision about parenthood. While they have this in common, they differ in terms of risk taking behaviour. The childfree couples were actively preventing conception and as one participant said “very methodical with birth control”. The couples with children on the other hand, took what Sam, the writer, retrospectively called the “que sera sera” approach:

We won’t take any preventative action this time and if it doesn’t happen, that’s okay. But if it does happen, well, we’ll cope.

Why did these couples engage in reproductive risk taking when they were unable to decide on the timing of children? Currie’s (1988) research on reproductive decision-making indicates that for women the notion of a “right time” to have a child refers to “a configuration of material circumstances” (Currie 1988:243) rather than personal characteristics such as maturity, or age. Previous research on motherhood (Currie 1988; Gerson 1985; Ranson 1998) suggests that middle class women in particular feel that they

need to address and personally manage concerns surrounding financial security, career goals, and housing before having children. Currie (1988) argues that these issues are related to structural processes such as the organization of waged employment, the sexual division of childcare labour, and the privatized costs of reproduction. When the women in Currie's study were able to conceptualize or develop personal strategies in order to manage these external structural constraints, they were able to frame their decision as the "right time" to have a child. However, for a variety of reasons some of the women were unable to develop what they perceived as satisfactory solutions to the material constraints of motherhood. For these women the "right time" never came, therefore their dilemma was resolved by engaging in contraceptive risk-taking:

Women in this study faced the often impossible task of developing personal strategies to resolve structurally generated problems. While risk-taking does not bring control over structural processes, it re-locates the contradictions by bringing them within the realm of personal activity. Once within the context of the respondent's personal life, these contradictions become accessible to personal activity....(Currie 1988:249).

Similar to the women in Currie's study the women and men who participated in this project addressed material conditions and how these related to their decisions about children. The couples for whom children arrived earlier than expected had also considered these issues when thinking about when to start a family. Although their first pregnancies were not planned, these couples were ready to take on parenthood at least in part because they felt that material circumstances of their lives were conducive to raising children. For example, when asked why she felt she was ready to have a child, Dana explained that in addition to her biological clock, practical issues such as finances, housing, and career were in place:

Well we'd bought a house, we uh you know I had worked for several years full time...and I'd gone back, I'd completed my degree so I'd reached goals in my career that I wanted to....And you know I felt financially that we could do it. So I think that was it. I just felt, I felt ready.

The fathers were concerned with the financial implications of having children, even though these concerns may not have been addressed prior to pregnancy. Sam, the writer, also managed a home business and explained that once he found out that his wife was pregnant financial considerations immediately became important:

It probably wasn't until that point when we, we knew Sue was pregnant that I became grounded in some reality and started talking about pragmatics and how are we going to do this. Are you going to resign and stay home or, you know, what will happen? Where will we live? How will we live?

A concern with material circumstances is shared by the couples in this study and participants in previous research on reproductive decision-making, in particular the contraceptive risk takers for whom the right time to start a family never comes. However, in addition to material concerns, this research reveals that in many cases one partner was ready to start a family before their mate. This necessarily makes the decision-making process more complex than Currie suggests. The implications that this has for deciding on the "right time" will be discussed in greater detail in the final chapter.

In conclusion, placing reproductive "decisions" on a continuum highlights the often indeterminate nature of reproductive decision-making. While the couples at each end of the continuum had made a final decision about parenthood, many couples fell somewhere in between these two poles and had not reached a decision whether or when to have children. It appears that what are often termed reproductive "decisions" in the

literature are for many of these couples not “decisions” at all, at least in the common sense usage of the word.

While this chapter focused on the nature of the outcomes of the decision-making process, it did not emphasize what kinds of issues couples take into account when trying to decide about children. However, the following chapter explores how couples’ expectations for parenthood inform their reproductive intentions.

## **Chapter Five: Expectations for parenthood and reproductive decisions**

Thus far I have examined the ways that couples move through the reproductive decision-making process, from discussions and negotiations to sometimes, but not always, eventual resolutions. I have highlighted the often contested nature of the decision-making dance and the fluidity of the outcomes. What remains to be discussed are expectations for parenthood and the ways in which these inform the decision-making process. More specifically, this chapter explores some of the issues that childless couples take into account when facing questions of whether and/or when to have children and how these are related to expectations for parenthood.

As the purpose of this particular chapter is to explore the link between expectations for parenthood and reproductive decisions, a sub-sample of couples who had not experienced parenthood were selected from the larger sample. As these couples were childless they had to rely solely on their expectations rather than actual experiences when talking about their intentions. This sub-sample includes four couples who were planning to have children (Tom and Anna, Craig and Crystal, Allan and Kelley, Sheldon and Theresa); four couples who were not planning to have children (Brad and Michelle, Mark and Joanne, Jake and Trisha, John and Glenda); and one undecided couple (Shaun and Cindy). None of these couples had children at the time they were interviewed, therefore they lacked an experiential framework on which to base their decision<sup>5</sup>. As a result, in

---

<sup>5</sup> As noted in an earlier footnote Sheldon had a child from a previous relationship.



their talk about decisions regarding the transition to parenthood, all of these participants relied, at least to a certain degree, on their *expectations* of parenthood to guide their decision.

### **Career interruptions and financial concerns**

Two key themes emerged from the interview data on the childless couples. These themes are related to the career and financial implications of having children. These issues were addressed by participants regardless of their parenthood intentions. When participants were asked questions about their decision-making process women were far more likely than their male partners to speak about career interruptions. In fact none of the men in this study mentioned career interruptions as something they considered when discussing the possibility of having children. However, the women focused on the fact that if or when they chose to have children their careers would be at least temporarily interrupted. Glenda, the 44-year-old part time elementary school teacher, did not intend to have children. However she expected that if she had children she would have been a stay-at-home mother:

Um, John would have been supportive of me staying home, it's not that I felt I would have to juggle a career. I'm sure I could have stayed home and he would have had no problem with that.

While all of these childless women expected that their careers would be interrupted if they chose to have children, only half were concerned that an absence from work would have a negative impact on their careers. Anticipating this they spoke of the

ways in which they would try to minimize the effect that having children would have on their careers. Crystal, a 23-year-old engineer who planned to have children, was worried about the career implications of having children even before she entered the workforce:

I remember second year [of university]...I thought why am I even doing this? I'm just going to get married right after I graduate, and then he's going to want to have kids and I'm going to be out of work for five years and it's going to be impossible to get back. I was a pessimist....So at the time I was in that funky depressed mood that I decided yeah I'm probably going to have kids and it's probably going to be too early and once I met Craig I knew that everything would be okay. That we'd find a way to work around it and he wasn't going to push me to have kids earlier than I wanted to. And yeah I could work at my job and become technically good at it before I have kids, go have kids, and come back and be a manager. That's kind of, you know I've adapted my career plan around that so that I can still take time off work and not be scared that I will be banished to the secretary role for the rest of my life.

As male-dominated occupations tend to offer fewer incentives for combining work and family life it is not surprising that it was the women who worked in occupations such as engineering who were the most concerned about the career implications of having children. This finding supports previous research on reproductive decision-making concluding that the organization of paid work affects reproductive decision-making (e.g. see Ranson 1998).

Rather than discussing temporary or permanent withdrawal from the workforce, the men were far more likely to mention financial issues concerning children. This is not to say that the women who were interviewed were unaware of the financial implications of having children, however they did not demonstrate nearly the same degree of concern with financial matters that their male partners did.

For the men who did not intend to have children some expressed concerns that they would no longer have the same degree of financial freedom if they had children.

Mark, the utility worker, did not have a high level of job security or a post-secondary education. He commented:

We're quite happy to have the financial flexibility to do things. Um, you know, to own things. Where perhaps we probably would not have been able to do so. Because I'm not in the doctor, lawyer earnings potential to ever say oh, well we'll just have kids 'cause money's no object anyways. That's not the case. Money is an object.

Others, like Craig, the engineering student engaged to Crystal, planned to start a family in a few years and addressed issues such as providing financially for children:

You know, we'll be in a house, comfortable in jobs, and that sort of thing....financially stable I guess is the key....All I can really think of is you know, we're going to be financially ready for it....Well you know you've already set up education funds, things like that.

When asked whether there were things he wanted to have or get done before starting a family, Tom, whose wife Anna was also an engineer, noted that he wanted to delay starting a family until he felt financially secure:

I think that's part of the timing issue. Um, not right away, Anna wants to do a few things, she wants to go live in a foreign country and do things before she has to be a parent. I'm of the same mind for different reasons I guess. I want to get a little more financially secure and career sound....

Like the women in Currie's (1988) research these participants wished to have a certain configuration of material circumstances in place before having children.

However, what became clear in this study is that the material circumstances participants desired were divided along gendered lines. Specifically, the women considered career matters when thinking about children, while the men were more concerned with finances.

*Planning to have children: optimism and accommodation*

While career interruptions and financial concerns are themes common to all of the couples, there are also themes that differentiate them in important ways. Overall, the couples who were planning to have children had more optimistic expectations for parenthood than their counterparts who had chosen not to have children. While they recognized that parenthood could be challenging they tended to minimize the trials of family life and focus on the positive experiences that they expected parenthood to bring. Theresa, the nursing student, planned to have children shortly after she finished her university degree and felt that the way social life is organized today is far more conducive to having children than it once was:

We have grown somewhat in society where men do take some responsibility right, are an active member of the household. So it's not like you're going to do it all on your own even though maybe you've seen your mother do it. You don't have to do that....things have changed like school, they provide day cares if you're still going to school right. If you go to the gym they have day care. You know everywhere you go they try to accommodate families. So it's not as tough as it was once...it's much more flexible. And there's more people working from home now and that's accessible and I don't know I just think that in today's day and age it may be more expensive to have children but it's far easier.

While it is to be expected that the couples with the most optimistic expectations for parenthood planned to have children, more interesting were the ways in which these future parents' expectations for family life revealed an underlying assumption of a traditional model of family life<sup>6</sup>. For the most part the sexual division of labour that is embedded in the traditional family was uncontested terrain. The women and men

---

<sup>6</sup> I recognize that the notion of a "traditional family" is widely debated in the literature. The concept of a traditional family implies that this particular family form, consisting of a married heterosexual couple in which the husband is the primary breadwinner and the wife the primary caregiver, was universal. Most social scientists now recognize that this particular family form was class and race specific. However, as

planned to respond to the requirements of a traditional family in different ways. Most notably these future mothers expected to interrupt their careers for a year or more. They would make the accommodations necessary in order to realize this particular model of family life. Just as importantly, their partners expected that at least for a period of time they would be responsible for providing financially for their family.

It is not surprising then that these future parents believed that it was best for one parent to stay home with the child at least for the first year, and for most the underlying assumption was that it would be the mother who would take on this job. Crystal was one of the female engineers who was concerned about career interruptions. Her own mother stayed home and Crystal felt that it would be “selfish” to go back to work too soon after having children:

The selfish me wants to give birth and then go back to work when I feel like it but I want my kids not to be latchkey kids. I want to be there you know from birth to kindergarten and make their lunch for them and take them to school. You know, work like mad for six-and-a-half hours and then be there to pick them up or be home when they're dropped off. That's *ideally* what I want for them.

Kelley, the participant who negotiated an earlier start date with her husband Allan, noted:

But if you can stay home, my whole thing is if you can stay home I personally would want to just because I made the choice to have the kids [so] why would I want to miss out on anything? But depends, I mean maybe I'll be like, oh I don't think so, but I hope I could stay home because that would be my goal.

When I asked whether Allan would take parental leave it became apparent that she was not familiar with the benefits available to fathers, nor had she spoken with him about the possibility of taking parental leave. This is not surprising given that Allan, who grew up in a traditional family, also assumed that she would stay home with the child:

---

this sample also consists of primarily white, heterosexual, middle class couples I will use this term for lack of a better word.

I had a vision of what kind of life I wanted my family to have and I always wanted my spouse to have the option to stay home if she wanted to. And you know, the decision's entirely up to Kelley what she wants to do, and I don't think we'll know for sure until we actually have a child and Kelley spends some time at home with it.

This group was largely uncritical of the sexual division of family labour and was far more willing to make the necessary accommodations required to realize this model of family life. Theresa expected that she would work full-time as a nurse until she had a child and then would return to the workforce part-time:

Because it's not always just the man being, going out and being the breadwinner, taking home all the money, and mom stays home and is the house mom. And I think that's wonderful cause I have a girlfriend who's doing it and I applaud her for doing it. I couldn't do it....I will need to be able to work part time.

Again the underlying assumption was that she would be the primary caregiver and presumably her partner would be the main breadwinner. She would modify her work hours in order to care for her future child. However, as noted earlier, she also expected that her partner would take "some responsibility" for housework and childcare. It is also noteworthy that while she was clearly expecting to step back from her career in order to be the primary caregiver, she did not think she was being traditional - her girlfriend was the "house mom" but she "couldn't do it."

It is also important to note that the participants were not completely naive about the costs and limitations of a traditional model of family life. For example, Anna, the 24-year-old engineer married to Tom, wanted to get four years of work experience before starting a family, recognizing that career interruptions could potentially have unfavorable consequences:

Well that's why, that's why I think ultimately I want to wait until four years from now or until my career's on the go because yeah once you're at that stage I mean then you have to decide who's staying home or if anyone's staying home. And if someone wants to stay home you know their career's put on hold and so many permanent things could happen from that.

Anna was not the only future mother who noted that fathers could also potentially stay home to look after children. However for a variety of reasons this option was often quickly dismissed. Crystal, the engineer who was just beginning her career in this male-dominated occupation, felt that it would not be wise for her future husband to stay home and look after their children, as he would have a better chance of being promoted:

Well I've suggested Craig could stay home but that hasn't been received well! I think in that regard too it would be smarter for me to stay home because he has in engineering I think better opportunities for career advancement. Maybe that's not a fair thing to say but it's sometimes how I feel. And when you look at all the head brass and they are all guys, you know middle aged white men. So he might have better opportunity for advancement. And I, you know if he stayed home and I just kept being an intermediate structural engineer for the rest of my life instead of moving on to management, it would be better for the family for him to go to work and me stay home.

It is clear that when adjustments are necessary in order to realize their ideal of a male breadwinner/female caregiver family it will be the future mothers, not fathers, who will do the accommodating. It was the women I spoke with who anticipated the need to plan for career interruptions, and adjust their work schedules in order to accommodate a child in their lives, not their male partners.

Shaun and Cindy, the couple who were undecided about children at the time of the interviews, both grew up in traditional families and felt it was very important to have one parent stay at home. Cindy remarked that Shaun had offered to stay home in the event that they chose to have children. Although Shaun, the "house guy" who looked

after many of the domestic chores, was a “very nurturing person”, it was Cindy who clearly expected to be the primary caregiver. She was concerned that having a child might change her feelings about a job that she enjoyed very much:

...work would be a big thing for sure. And I'd be really afraid that after a year going back to work and then missing the child so much that you don't want to be there anymore.

*Not planning to have children: resignation and resistance*

The couples who did not intend to have children pointed to the traditional model of family life to account for their desire to forego parenthood. This was interesting as the same family model framed the thinking of the couples who intended to have children. However, the couples who planned to remain childless tended to be much more critical of this type of family arrangement and the sexual division of labour embedded within it. Jake grew up in a traditional family and also managed a workplace that employed mainly women:

I don't how couples get through those first five years. It just, it seems to me and this is going to sound sexist, or biased, or whatever, but it really, and you have to take in the upbringing that I come from, which is *very* traditional....But it really seems like the woman gets *fucked* in the deal, period. And you know what, and I see this, I manage, I mean a lot of women work for me. And I, it's *really* hard because their career often gets screwed.

Trisha, a hairstylist, was also very critical of the sexual division of family work that occurred when she was growing up:

I guess that goes back to, do I think women are going to do more. Cause they did in my house. My brothers didn't do anything. They still don't. It was my responsibility; my older brother didn't have to do anything. And I was so angry about that. Well why, because he has a penis he doesn't have to do the dishes? Like that's just ridiculous.



Interestingly Trisha did not appear to be overly concerned that her own husband did not do any housework. However, she expected that her domestic workload would increase if they chose to have children and therefore felt that having children was a much bigger commitment for a woman to make:

As much as men have, I think as much as men think they've changed over the last few years...I don't think the roles have changed that much. I think that men certainly help out a little bit more around the house, but I think the woman has to completely change her entire life to have kids. And, so I think it's a much stronger decision for a woman to make than it is for a man... But if Jake and I had kids, it would affect my life more than it would affect his. And I know that, because Jake does not do a *thing* around this house. Nothing. No he doesn't. And he will admit that to you. Like there's just nothing that he...he wouldn't...I think it impacts women more than men, for sure. It affects their jobs, affects their career.

From Trisha's perspective a child would be the catalyst that created an even more inequitable division of labour in their household.

Jake also believed that these inequities were inevitable although not altogether desirable. Jake confided that he would like to have children if he could stay home with them but felt that the only way that would be possible would be to win the lottery:

I think the number one selfish reason I don't want kids is because...the way that [Trisha's] and my lives are structured. *Inevitably* and most *likely* I would be working a lot and she would be home a lot and that would really, really bug me.... I think there's potential that I would be very jealous of that and that would bug me. I've always said I'd love to have kids if I could stay home with them. Or another thing I say is I'd love to have kids if I had a million dollars and I could *do* that.

Perhaps the most striking finding from the group opting out of parenthood was the extent to which the traditional model of family life was perceived to be inevitable. For the most part these participants resigned themselves to the fact that if they chose to have

children they would inevitably fall into the mother as caregiver and father as breadwinner mold. Participants put forward several explanations for the pervasiveness of this pattern. Joanne, the participant who had a tubal ligation when she was 35, pointed to a woman's physiology to explain the inevitability of the sexual division of labour:

Um, I think women have always been just the primary caregiver. Primarily because it's a physiological function, you breastfeed, you just have that bond with the child and until men can do that it's gonna stay the same. And this is still very much a society where the man goes out and works and in many cases the woman does too. But primarily the man in most cases is the major breadwinner and that hasn't changed overly so in the last you know 50 years.

Other participants felt that their own, or their partner's, career demands would make the sexual division of labour unavoidable. Glenda's husband John was a senior manager in a multinational oil and gas company. She felt that if she had chosen to have children John's job obligations would have created a situation where the responsibility for childcare would necessarily be hers:

I guess for myself, I said *I feel* that the burden of it would be on me. Um, John's job is more busy, more responsible. And I remember at least one time saying to him, you know you're really busy now working 12, 14 hour days. Why would it change if we had kids? And he said, oh yeah, I...would be there more often. I said no you can't say that, I don't believe it. I know other people have said the same and it generally is the woman who has to give up things...to do this and um, so that was one of the things, the time factor.

John also felt that the traditional family was inevitable. However he did not refer to career demands as an explanation, but rather felt that mothers were more involved with children than fathers perhaps because that was the natural order of things:

But just my observation is that couples I know with children there appears to be this, this kind of greater connection with the woman. And the woman appears to vocalize or talk about, be more consumed by, the children in her family than the guy does....Glenda um used to tell me as part of this decision thing, in the context of you know how it works and the sacrifice, she said you know she remains, she couldn't see any other way that this would play out in our relationship than the way we've described it. So she would say "you know, John, you know as much as you can give me all these words about equal partnership, help and all the rest of it, um I can't see how the family would evolve in anything but you know the way that we've described with my role being more consuming, more influential just in a practical sense just more time spent with children than will you." And I'd have to say that you know that's what I've observed in couples that we know. And it's not just couples where the man's got a fairly involved career you know. I'd say it ranges from very senior people in corporations to people that are running their own little businesses to in one case a truck driver, um so it doesn't look to me like it's occupationally influenced. It's just, it just seems to be the way it goes....By the way that might be exactly the way it should be and naturally but I'm like you, anybody that tells me that it actually feels and works differently in a more balanced way, I don't, it's not been my experience.

While these participants had various explanations for the inevitability of the traditional family, they all shared the perception that this arrangement was for the most part unavoidable. To varying degrees the couples who planned to forego parenthood believed that the arrival of children would inevitably result in their entry into a traditional family arrangement. Most of these participants did not find this arrangement to be appealing. These couples discursively rationalized their intentions to remain childless by pointing to the sexual division of labour embedded in such arrangements.

By foregoing parenthood, these couples were in one sense resisting these arrangements. Their form of resistance is not revolutionary, however. Ultimately, opting out of parenthood is a passive rather than an active form of resistance. An active form of resistance to the sexual division of family labour would involve making a firm commitment to exploring and enacting alternative and more equitable family arrangements. For example, shared parental leave, alternatives to maternal childcare, and

shared responsibility for breadwinning and childcare, are a few of the ways in which the sexual division of labour embedded in the traditional family can be avoided. Couples who engage with these alternatives begin to carve out an alternative space—a space that traditional families do not inhabit, and childless families may not envisage. This is a space where equitable co-parenting arrangements are explored and enacted. The couples in this study, whether they planned to have children or not, did not point to these types of arrangements as viable alternatives.

While it may be tempting to assume that the participants were unaware of these options, this would be overstating the case. Some participants' accounts provided glimpses of an alternative space. As noted earlier, Anna and Crystal, the two new engineers who planned to have children, remarked that their partners could potentially stay home to look after the children. Jake, the office manager married to Trisha, also mentioned that if they had chosen to have children he would have enjoyed staying home to care for them. However, when participants did mention these alternatives they were quickly dismissed as unworkable options. Some went on to discursively rationalize their rejection of these options by pointing to the organization of their workplaces, and ideologies of motherhood and fatherhood.

### **Discourse and ideological codes**

Gaskell's (2001) research, done in the late 1970's, examines adolescents' expectations for their future family lives. This study revealed that both young girls and boys expected to work outside of the home. However the girls also believed that when

they had children paid work would become secondary to their household responsibilities. The boys, on the other hand, expected to be breadwinners and assumed that their female partner would be responsible for the majority of domestic work including childcare.

The childless couples in this study had similar expectations for family life. These couples expected that if or when they had children the male partner would be the primary breadwinner, and the female partner would be responsible for the majority of childcare. Why is it that these childless couples viewed the traditional model of family life as either desirable or inevitable? Why didn't they look beyond this arrangement for what promised to be more egalitarian alternatives?

According to Smith (1999) the use of discourses is a social activity that organizes people's daily activities. Discourses are mediated by texts (whether written, printed, televised, or computerized) and the texts themselves are organized by "ideological codes" (Smith 1999 :157). Similar to the way that genetic codes transmit and reproduce their chemical order to cells, ideological codes transmit and reproduce their order in various discursive sites (Smith 1999).

#### *SNAF – The "standard North American family"*

The ideological code of SNAF infiltrates various discursive settings and frames people's thinking about family life (Smith 1999). All family types are compared to and measured against the ideological code of SNAF. Smith defines SNAF the following way:

[SNAF] is a conception of The Family as a legally married couple sharing a household. The adult male is in paid employment; his earnings provide the economic basis of the family-household. The adult female may also earn an income, but her primary responsibility is to the care of husband, household, and children (Smith 1999 :159).

The nature of the childless couples' expectations for parenthood is testament to the pervasive and insidious ways that SNAF frames the discourse on parenthood and families. Ideological codes like SNAF serve to organize the ways in which these couples think about parenthood and their expectations for family life. It is clear that SNAF transmits and reproduces itself in the discursive practices of these couples. Perhaps SNAF is such a powerful discourse that for these couples it effectively obscures any alternatives to this arrangement. As Smith argues:

...ideological codes don't appear directly...no one seems to be imposing anything on anybody else; people pick up an ideological code from reading, hearing, or watching, and replicate it in their own talk or writing. They pass it along. Once ideological codes are established, they are self-reproducing (1999 :175).

While the "SNAF" code conceals the available alternatives, ironically it is precisely these alternatives that must be engaged with if the inequitable division of labour embedded within SNAF is ever to be addressed.

#### *Doing SNAF—couples with children*

Smith (1993) argues that family discourse is thoroughly infused by the ideological code of SNAF. She also notes that discourse is more than just conversations, it also organizes people's daily activities:

My notion [of discourse] goes beyond Foucault's (1972) conception of discourse as a conversation mediated by texts, to include how actual people take them up, the practices and courses of actions ordered by them, and how they coordinate the activities of one with those of another or others (Smith 1999:158).

This study provides support for Smith's argument. Of the fourteen couples who participated in this study, five had one or more children at the time they were interviewed. These couples provided concrete examples of the ways in which daily activities such as household labour were organized by SNAF-ordered discourse. In other words, SNAF not only orders the way we think and talk about families but how we "do" families.

Four of the five couples with children embodied the SNAF model of family life. That is four mothers were primary caregivers to their children and their partners were breadwinners. While some of the women worked outside of the home it was on a casual or part-time basis only. All of the men worked full time outside of the home. This finding supports the work of Fox (2001) who examined married couples' transition to parenthood. Fox found that even when the most egalitarian couples become parents the division of family work becomes increasingly inequitable and segregated along gender lines.

For the most part it did not appear that the four "SNAF" couples in this study negotiated the sexual division of family labour. As they felt that ideally one parent should be at home to provide childcare, it was assumed that it would be the mother who would take on this role. Marilyn and Jerry, parents of an eight-month-old daughter, were typical of the parents in this study in that they did not want to have their child in day care and assumed that the mother would stay home in the role of primary caregiver. When Jerry was asked to describe some of the early conversations that he and Marilyn had about children he replied:

We very explicitly looked at our capabilities, my, well me in particular as I guess still, obviously would be the primary breadwinner and the only breadwinner while Marilyn would be incapacitated with pregnancy and caring for the baby for certainly the first year or two. Which we both felt it was really important for one or both parents to be you know mainly taking care of the child rather than day care.

It is worth noting that although these mothers and fathers may have had a fairly traditional division of labour, this is not to say that the fathers completely renounced care-giving activities. While the level of involvement varied, several of the fathers were involved as much as they possibly could be while holding a full-time job. Jerry, a very involved father, explained that for him an important part of fatherhood was caring for his daughter:

Oh, I really didn't know, you know I just didn't have any idea [what fatherhood would be like] and ah although I'll tell you that the more I get up in the middle of the night when I really want to sleep and um you know when she has a little temperature and I sleep on the floor here next to the crib, that's when I really feel like a dad. You know I really, this is it, this is...you know, doing whatever it takes to keep her happy and comfortable and take care of her needs. She's just completely dependent on us and every single little thing she needs is going to come from us. I mean when I do that I feel really, really good.

Jill, the mother who had her third child in her early forties, felt that "showing patience and love" were important qualities for a good mother. When asked what makes a good father she felt that the same qualities applied. She also noted that women can provide financially for their families:

I mean a dad...okay dads are the providers you know like in most families. But when the woman goes back to work too she is providing just as much.

Even though Jill felt that mothers and fathers could contribute equally in terms of finances, she explained that women still provide the majority of childcare:



And so cause I think, well when it all comes down to it, still the woman, no matter what, if you have someone that does everything fifty-fifty, it's still, you are still the main caregiver....

### *SNAF and social class*

It is apparent that the SNAF code organized both the expectations for parenthood and the lived experiences of these couples. However, what must not be overlooked are the material circumstances of these couples' lives. Enacting a traditional family arrangement is not feasible unless the male partner's wages are sufficient to support a family. As these couples were predominantly middle-class<sup>7</sup>, their social status allowed them the privilege to envision or embrace a traditional model of family life. While working-class couples may aspire to this type of arrangement, their economic circumstances do not allow them to put their ideals into practice (Hochschild and Machung 1989).

Clearly, the parents just described are not challenging the ideological code of SNAF and the corresponding sexual division of family labour. However, one couple in this study did choose alternative arrangements for childcare and household labour. David, the project manager, and Nancy, the bank manager, were parents to an 11-month-old daughter. Both worked outside of the home and shared the responsibility for childcare and housework. When asked what makes a good father both David and Nancy felt that sharing the workload was important. David put it this way:

---

<sup>7</sup> As participants were not asked to report their annual income, social class is inferred from educational and occupational status.

I think somebody that can forget about all the macho crap that happened fifty years ago. There's no such thing anymore. There's the man and the woman, you know like he's the worker and she's the homemaker, I mean it's stupid. I got friends that you know, "Oh my wife cooks me supper and does this and does that." In our house it's fifty-fifty, or sixty-forty, or if I had to cook for two weeks I wouldn't care. You know I mean [Nancy] works as much as I do and brings home money....

Even though others had questioned David and Nancy's choice to put their daughter in a day home, David still believed that they made the right choice:

People always say, "Well why did you put [your daughter] in a day home?" "Like how could you do that?" [Nancy's] a career person and I wouldn't expect her to stay home and do the mother thing and I don't think that's a bad thing that we did that.

Nancy did not appear to be as certain as her husband that choosing to return to work was the right decision. She explained that the "guilt you go through as a working mom" is experienced in two ways, "the guilt of not being at home to raise your child and the guilt of *wanting* to be at work." Like the women in Hertz's (1997) study who chose to use non-kin caregivers, Nancy felt guilty for not being with her child.

Clearly, David and Nancy did not conform to a SNAF model of family life but rather chose alternative arrangements or what Hertz calls the "market approach" (1997:374) to childcare. In this approach couples resolve work/family dilemmas by hiring others (usually women) to care for their children. However, this approach does little to disrupt the sexual division of labour typical of traditional families. Rather couples who adopt this approach further inequalities between themselves and the women they hire to care for their children (Hertz 1997:374). In contrast, couples who choose the "parenting approach" (Hertz 1997:374) to childcare alter the gender system that locates

women as mothers and men as breadwinners. These couples pursue less demanding or more flexible jobs so that both partners can participate equally in childcare. None of the couples in this study disrupted the sexual division of household labour in this way.

### **Institutional constraints**

It is apparent that the SNAF “code” infiltrates family discourse and frames not only the ways in which we think about family life but also the ways in which we act. The work of Smith provides a possible explanation for the pervasiveness of SNAF and the corresponding sexual division of labour. However, research in the area of reproductive decision-making also points to the role of institutional constraints in the organization of family life (e.g. see Blain 1993; Currie 1988; Gerson 1985; Gerson 1993; Ranson 1998). For example, both Currie and Ranson argue that the organization of waged employment influences women’s decisions about the transition to motherhood. The work of Blain (1993:407) draws on Foucault (1978), Holloway (1989) and others, to explain the reciprocal relationship between discourse and institutional constraints:

People, as active agents, base their activities and choices, rationally or otherwise, on what they perceive to be the situation in which they find themselves. That is, they live within a concrete world, of finite resources and other people. But their perceptions of these resources and people, and the choices available to them, are systematically structured by social processes, such as gender and class, through the operation of discourses, sets of terms, phrases, and ideas, which they use to make sense of their material and social world. Through these discourses women and men position themselves, and are positioned by others, as beings, gendered and classed, within sets of social relations.

For the couples who participated in this study it was apparent that discourse (such as SNAF), as well as institutional constraints were implicated in the decisions they made about the way to arrange their family lives. The organization of social institutions, such as the workplace, played an important role in decisions such as whether or when to start a family. For example, when making plans for her first child Marilyn felt that having a career that allowed for temporary absences was important:

Can I have a career that I can stop for a little while, which is another reason why I really like nursing. I mean it's wonderful; it's very family oriented and the hospital is open twenty-four hours a day. So I thought oh, well you know, maybe I can work evening shifts, I can work weekends, which is actually what I am doing now, so um I mean really it's perfect.

Dana and Greg, the parents of three boys, both felt that it was important for one parent to be at home to care for their children. Dana explained that it would obviously be her that would stay home because as a nurse she made considerably less money than Greg, who is an engineer:

...we wanted to make sure that one of us could stay home as much as possible. Perhaps not full, full time but at least one of us could go to a part time arrangement, which of course would most likely be me because my husband earned more than I did.

Interestingly, David, who shared childcare with Nancy, pointed to the organization of his workplace to explain why he didn't take parental leave:

I don't think we ever, my name [never] came up to stay home. I couldn't really do it with my job, I'm the busiest in the summer, we're a general contracting company so. If it was a year thing we might have split it six and six. If I could have stayed home, I would've stayed home. Not a, not a question asked.

It appears then that both discourse and the organization of social institutions such as the workplace frame the ways in which these couples account for their reproductive decisions.

In sum, the expectations that these couples have for parenthood are implicated in their reproductive intentions. While the women expected to interrupt their careers to have children, the men's accounts suggest that they were more concerned with the financial implications of having children. However, regardless of their reproductive intentions or outcomes, the ideological code of SNAF, as well as institutional constraints, framed how these couples talked about parenthood and children.

Earlier chapters considered how the reproductive decision-making process evolved and the various kinds of outcomes that emerged, while this chapter explored expectations for parenthood. Next I will examine more closely the implications of these findings; the strengths and weaknesses of the study; and finally, some suggestions for the direction and focus of future research.

## **Chapter Six: Discussion and conclusion**

From its inception, the goal of this study was to examine how couples engage in reproductive decision-making. As advances in preventative reproductive technologies enable contemporary heterosexual couples to control their fertility, I wanted to explore how couples decide amongst the parenthood alternatives now available to them. I was particularly curious about the reproductive decision-making *process* that partners engage in when faced with decisions about parenthood. In other words, the objective was to discover how couples confront, negotiate, and ultimately decide whether or when they will have children.

While the intent was to explore how couples reached a final decision about parenthood, one of the most interesting and unexpected findings for the couples interviewed for this study was that “decision” was a misnomer. As discussed in Chapter Four, the decision-making “dance” seldom resulted in a final “decision” about children. Many of these couples had not in fact made a final and deliberate “decision” to become parents, or alternatively to remain childless, and the decisions that did appear to be firm could also be temporarily or permanently set aside. For instance, John who was married to Glenda, the teacher, remarked that even though he and Glenda were confident that children were very likely not part of their future, rather than making a “definitive decision” to forego parenthood they simply “parked it”. In essence they chose to set the issue aside, rather than continue to engage in the decision-making process in order to reach a final decision.

While reproductive outcomes are often framed as “decisions”, this term implies a sense of finality. However, for many of these couples reproductive “decisions” were more fluid in nature than the concept of “decision” suggests. As some of the outcomes that evolved from the decision-making dance could be changed, parked, or re-visited in the future, perhaps reproductive “decisions” are better framed as reproductive intentions.

The finding that the decision-making dance did not always result in a firm decision raises the question of whether other important family decisions are “decided” in the same complex and fluid manner. Perhaps the model of decision-making described in this research may be applicable to other kinds of decisions that couples make over the course of their lives. When prompted, many participants remarked that the reproductive decision-making process was different from other important decisions they had made as it was a more emotional one. However, they were almost always referring to decisions about career changes, buying a home, or moving to another city. Perhaps these types of decisions are less emotional than those that have direct implications for at least one other family member. For example, the decision to place one’s aging parent in a nursing home, is potentially a difficult and emotional one. Perhaps the decision-making model proposed in this study could provide insights into research on how couples make these kinds of decisions.

### **Reproductive decision-making in context**

Clearly many of the couples in this study did not make a “decision” about children. However, there is a broader issue that needs to be addressed at this stage. We should also ask whether having, or not having, a child is really a “choice”. Thus far the

discussion of reproductive decision-making frames the decision of whether and/or when to have children as a “choice”. As women and men living in a country where contraceptives are accessible to the majority of the population, the couples who participated in this study had the ability to control their fertility through contraception. Therefore, in theory, they also had a “choice” about whether and/or when to have children.

The notion of reproductive “choice” is rooted in feminist struggles for women’s autonomy in relation to procreation (Katz Rothman 1999; Tietjens Meyers 2001). Feminists have long demanded not only that women’s right to procreate should be protected but also that women must also be able to choose not to procreate (Tietjens Meyers 2001). As a result of these initiatives reproductive issues are embedded in the language of choice (Tietjens Meyers 2001). In this context, one merely needs to “choose” if, when, or how to bear a child (Katz Rothman 1999).

While the notion of choice is important to understanding reproductive decision-making, Katz Rothman notes that as sociologists, “[w]e need to look not at the individual decision, but at the social context, the world in which that decision is made” (1999:406). Reproductive decision-making does not occur in a vacuum. Rather it is enacted within a social context that both enables and constrains the “choices” that couples have available to them. Therefore, just as the material conditions of these couples’ existence cannot be ignored, neither can the discursive environment be overlooked. Specifically, a comprehensive understanding of reproductive decision-making must take into account that the participants in this study live in a world infused by pronatalist discourses which incorporate the belief that married couples should have and want children.



Gillespie (2000) examines whether traditional pronatalist discourses have been transformed in the face of significant social changes such as the entry of large numbers of women into the paid labour force, and the increasing prevalence of childless women. She concludes that these motherhood discourses are still pervasive. Rather than decline, they re-emerge as modified and more sophisticated versions that acknowledge social change without disrupting the underlying pronatalist mandate. While the pervasiveness of pronatalist discourse in western societies is well documented in the literature (e.g. see Tietjens Meyers 2001; Veevers 1980), what has not been explored are the ways in which these discourses play out reproductive decision-making. It is also important to note that while pronatalism advocates parenthood for all married couples, parenthood is judged to be more important for women than for men (Veevers 1980).

Tietjens Meyers argues that pronatalist or “matrigyno-idolatry” (2001:736) discourse is a substantial obstacle to women’s autonomy over motherhood decisions. While she is careful to note that discourse does not determine women’s choices, she maintains that matrigyno-idolatry threatens women’s autonomy on several fronts. First, it trivializes doubts or misgivings that women may have about motherhood. Secondly, she argues that “pronatalist doctrine saturates women’s consciousness and chokes off the options that are subjectively available to them” (Tietjens Meyers 2001:751). Despite the pervasiveness of pronatalism, researchers have also pointed to the ways in which these discourses are subverted by childless women (Gillespie 2000), childless couples (Veevers 1980), lesbian women (Tietjens Meyers 2001) and less frequently heterosexual married women (Tietjens Meyers 2001). I am uncertain whether the women in this study who intended to remain childless were able to successfully challenge the discourse of

pronatalism. For at least some of the women in this study, it appears that the ability to defy pronatalism did not necessarily follow from a resolution to remain childless.

Although this theme was not directly addressed in the interviews, two women, Glenda and Michelle, confided that at times they wondered if something was “wrong” because they did not have a burning desire for children. Glenda expressed this in the following way:

I haven't, I didn't have [maternal feelings] either. And you know sometimes I think, I've said to myself, am I the only one that's like this...like there's something *wrong*, I'm not a real woman or something, because all women have this right? Cause that's the way society makes it out to be. There's something wrong with you if you're not this maternal, loving earth-mother kind of thing.

It is worth noting that pronatalism and SNAF are linked on an important dimension. While pronatalism promotes children, the ideology of SNAF assumes that there are children in the family. In this sense they are actually no different in their intentions. The discourse of pronatalism helps to better understand the context in which couples engage in reproductive decision-making. However, it is also worth revisiting some of the issues discussed in Chapter Five. These findings suggest that the ideology of SNAF frames the ways in which childless couples think about children, and the ways that couples with children organize their family lives. For both the couples who intended to have children, and those that did not, their accounts are testament to the way that the traditional model of family life goes unquestioned. Couples who planned to remain childless discursively rationalized their intentions by pointing to the sexual division of labour inherent in the traditional family. While couples who planned to have children

expected to pursue the SNAF model of family life, SNAF-ordered discourse also organized the daily activities of couples who had children.

It is apparent from the findings presented here that both SNAF and pronatalism are pervasive. They are also longstanding. And this presents problems for those interested in making family life more equitable. It appears that the couples in this study were relatively uncritical of traditional family arrangements, at least partly because discursive alternatives seemed to be muted. Social change would require that these alternatives become more prominent. One interesting site where this is happening is the U.S. based “Third Path” organization., which encourages reduced work schedules for *both* parents in order to allow “shared care” of children (Third Path 2001). At the practical level paid work needs to be organized differently. Workplaces must be reorganized in ways that allow both male and female employees to combine work and family life in equitable ways. Family policies such as flexible work schedules, child care benefits, sick time for families and family leave are a step in this direction. In addition, more research is required to determine the factors that support and hinder men's involvement in the lives of children. Finally, from an ideological perspective, as a society we must place more place more value on the work of caring for others. For example, the wages and working conditions of daycare workers are testament to the ways in which caregiving work is disparaged in our society.

The context in which “decisions” take place helps us to better understand the dynamics of the decision-making dance. As the feminist research on family decision-making outlined in the literature review suggests, families and the decisions made in families are embedded in a wider context of power relations. Especially salient for this

discussion are the ways in which family arrangements, promoted through discourses of pronatalism and SNAF in the ways I have just suggested, provide men with more privileges and power than women. This may provide a partial explanation as to why it was primarily women who led their partners through the decision-making dance. As Brad remarked, women have more of a “vested interest” in reproductive decisions. Both Jerry and Brad, who “defaulted” their votes to their wives, discursively rationalized their actions by pointing to the greater sacrifices that women make when they become mothers. Jerry focused on the sacrifice of pregnancy, which he felt was “stressful”, “tough” and even “dangerous”. As a result he would always “defer” to his wife Marilyn on reproductive matters as she was the one to “grow the baby in her body”. Brad, referring to the implications for Michelle’s career, noted that she would have to go through “a hell of a lot more” than he would if they had children. In her study of childlessness, Veevers (1980) also noted that some participants used the logic of unequal responsibility to explain why women were given the final say about children. She described one of the participant’s accounts as follows:

In his reasoning, since the woman must bear the children, look after them and assume primary responsibility for them, the decision whether or not to have children should be left to [his wife]. If for whatever reason she should not want children, no one – not even her husband – had a right to coerce her into motherhood (Veevers 1980:28-29)

While it is obvious that only women can bear children, the unquestioned assumption that seems to follow from this is that women are also responsible for raising children, and will temporarily or permanently interrupt their careers in order to do so. The perception that

women pay a heavier price when they have children rests on the assumption that family labour will be divided along gendered lines.

However, there is also a material reality that must be addressed here. Due to the way that the economy and workplaces are organized, the arrival of children usually limits women's employment opportunities, their prospects for promotion, and their long-range earning power (Tietjens Meyers 2001). In this sense women do have more at stake when making decisions about children. If both perceptions and material reality suggest that women have more at stake then it is not surprising that in most cases women were leaders in the decision-making dance while men were followers.

When men defer to women's wishes in reproductive decision-making there are two important implications. Men's willingness to comply with their partner's wishes is based on the premise that women must sacrifice more in order to have children. Therefore, in passing the final decision on to their partner these men do not challenge the assumption that women pay a heavier price. Rather, their actions simply reify the perception that women sacrifice more. Secondly, when men "default" their vote to their partner, this sets women up as "responsible" for the outcomes of the decision. As discussed in Chapter Four, if one partner is perceived to have a greater influence in decision-making they may also be given the responsibilities that are a result of that decision. Therefore, when men pass the final decision on to their partners they may avoid taking responsibility for any future repercussions. As noted earlier, Gerson's (1993) work suggests that men who are nudged into parenthood are able to opt out of the responsibility for childcare tasks. On the other hand, if men do take responsibility for

decisions, such as the one to have children, then they may also have to accept more responsibility for childcare.

For two of the couples in this study it was the men who nudged their partners towards parenthood. David and Nancy's relationship provides an example of the way that responsibilities may shift when men lead the decision-making dance. As discussed in Chapter Three, David had coaxed Nancy into parenthood. He also remarked that the traditional division of labour, or what he called "all that macho crap from fifty years ago", was "stupid". While David and Nancy did not completely disrupt the sexual division of labour, David's account suggests that he recognized that fatherhood would include sharing housework and childcare with Nancy. There is also an interesting contrast between the two men who were leaders in the decision-making dance. David appeared to be ready to take on fatherhood and the responsibilities for childcare that went along with it. On the other hand, James, who had convinced Jill to have a child with him, was responsible for very few childcare activities.

The notion that the leader in decision-making is also held accountable for the outcome may also help to explain why some participants were reluctant to take responsibility for being leaders. Here it is worth revisiting Glenda's account of the decision-making process. She noted that John felt he could have had a child but didn't pursue the issue because he knew that she didn't want children. However, Glenda felt that John wasn't "forceful enough" and told him, "don't push it back at *me*". Clearly Glenda did not want to be held accountable for their childfree status. Women, such as Glenda, who lead the decision-making dance in the direction of childlessness may also be held accountable for any regrets resulting from that. However, childless women may be

in a better position than their female counterparts who lead their partners towards parenthood. Women who nudge their partners into becoming fathers may not only be held accountable for any regrets that are a result of the decision but may also take most of the responsibility for childcare duties.

Also linked to the issue of responsibility are couples' discrepant accounts of the decision-making process. In Chapter Two I discussed Hertz's recommendation that researchers look beyond the story for clues that may aid in explaining inconsistent stories. In Chapter Three I highlighted several cases where partners' stories were inconsistent. Here I look to the broader social context to provide a preliminary explanation for why some participants may have chosen to tell their story in a particular way. The stories told by Allan, Greg, and Sam suggested that they were not as committed to parenthood as their partners. Discursively positioning themselves in this way may then allow them to "legitimately" pass responsibility for childcare on to their partners later on. For instance, Allan who remarked that he "kind of shrugged [his] shoulders and said okay dear, yes dear" when Kelley told him she wanted to have a child, also expected that his wife would take primary responsibility for childcare. Claiming to be a somewhat passive participant in the decision-making process may not only allow these men to pass responsibility for the decision on to their partners, but may also work to justify a sexual division of childcare labour.

The discussion of responsibility brings us back to the issue of power. The literature on family decision-making suggests that decisions must be considered in relation to the broader social context in which they occur—one in which men enjoy greater power and privileges than women. It may appear that when men defer to women

in decision-making they are relinquishing at least some of the power granted to them by virtue of their position in the wider society. However, yielding to their partners in the area of reproductive decision-making does not put men at a disadvantage. Rather, as they are exempt from responsibility they may be able to maintain certain privileges such as the choice to opt out of, or only “help” their partners with childcare. In essence the power dynamics are left unchallenged. The anomaly here is the men who were nudged into childlessness by their partners. There were several poignant stories from men for whom it appeared that had they married a different woman, they might have had children. For example, John confided that childlessness was not without its perils, and noted that it might even be “the biggest regret in the hierarchy of things”. In cases where men deferred to their partners’ wishes to remain childless the power dynamics that often favour men were challenged. It seems that in the context of pronatalism, it would take a powerful woman not only to forego motherhood, but also to nudge her reluctant partner towards childlessness. The issues of responsibility and power in reproductive decision-making provide considerable room for future research. I will discuss this shortly, but here it is worth noting that the power dynamic described in John and Glenda’s relationship, is one of many topics that could be explored in future research projects.

### **Contributions of the research**

One of the strengths of this project is that is an original one in several ways. First, it was possible to explore how power is implicated in reproductive-decision-making because, unlike previous research, I incorporated the critical feminist research on



decision-making in families into the study of reproductive decision-making. Secondly, this project is a novel contribution to research in this area as I chose to interview couples rather than individual women or men.

In order to illustrate the importance of exploring both partners' accounts of reproductive decision-making it is worth revisiting Currie's research on reproductive decisions. As discussed in Chapter Four, Currie argues that when the women in her study referred to the notion of a "right time" (1988:240) for motherhood, they were alluding to their material circumstances. Some participants mentioned that one component of the "right time" was having a "suitable" partner. Suitable in this context meant practical support in terms of taking responsibility for childcare and/or housework. However, the research did not address whether the participant's "suitable" partner was ready to start a family. In addition, as partners were not interviewed their perspectives on the "right time" to start a family are not known.

This study, on the other hand, included women and their partners, making it feasible to explore both partners' perspectives on timing and other issues. It became clear that for couples in this study, while the right material circumstances were perceived to be necessary prior to having children, these conditions were not sufficient in order to make a decision. I propose that the notion of a "right time" must also include a partner who is ready and willing to make a final decision about starting a family.

It is also important to note that for some of the couples in this study where one partner was not ready to start a family they had also engaged in passive decision-making. Perhaps this is not a coincidence. As discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four, the relationships of three couples were characterized by passive decision-making (where fate

made the final decision about children) and by one partner who was not ready for children. It is possible then that a relationship dynamic where one partner is ready to start a family sooner than their mate may play a role in passive decision-making. This has not been explored in the previous work on reproductive decision-making (e.g. see Gerson 1985; Gerson 1993; McMahon 1995; Ranson 1998), but may help to clarify why these couples were unable to make a “decision” about the timing of children.

As earlier studies did not include couples, partners’ accounts of the decision-making process were only accessible through the second hand information provided by the interviewee. However, the findings presented here suggest that this process is far too complex to be captured by interviewing only one half of the decision-making dyad. In fact, it has been suggested that it is precisely due to the dynamics resulting from couple interaction that this type of decision-making is an extremely complex one (Beckman 1982 cited in Miller and Pasta 1996). Therefore, one of the important contributions of this project is the emphasis on the ways in which *couples* engage in the reproductive decision-making process.

### **Limitations of the research**

While this research addressed new and important issues, the sample to which these issues were addressed was limited on two dimensions—social class and ethnicity. As noted in Chapter Two, the participants in this study were a relatively homogeneous group. The sample consisted of predominantly middle-class, well-educated, white couples. Despite a concerted effort, I was unable to attract participants whose

backgrounds differed from the couples mentioned above. One strategy that may have attracted working-class couples would have been to offer an incentive for participation such as grocery or gas coupons. It is also possible that posters, which were placed around the city as a way of recruiting participants, were deemed too impersonal. Perhaps a more effective strategy would have been to integrate myself into the groups that I wished to target by making requests for research participants at community meetings, multicultural gatherings, parents' groups and so on. While this sample was sufficient for an exploratory study such as this one, couples from diverse backgrounds would have provided a more comprehensive picture of reproductive decision-making.

In addition, it would have been helpful to have information about the birth control practices of all of the couples. In some of the interviews this information was revealed without prompting, but in others it was not disclosed. Having access to this information for all couples may have made it easier to determine the extent to which these couples were actively preventing conception or, alternatively, engaging in "proceptive" behaviour. As this is a relatively sensitive topic and was not my focus initially, I did not ask participants direct questions about birth control. However, I did ask most of the couples who intended to remain childless if they had taken any permanent steps to prevent pregnancy.

### **Suggestions for future research**

Because the couples who participated in this study had similar cultural and socioeconomic characteristics I was unable to explore whether reproductive decision-

making varies by ethnic background, class and so on. As some research suggests that social class has implications for the way that women (e.g. see Gerson 1985; McMahon 1995) and men (Gerson 1993) make reproductive decisions, it would have been beneficial to investigate how social class played out for *couples* faced with decisions about parenthood. Although this type of investigation was not possible in this study the literature suggests that it is an area worthy of further research.

As noted earlier, not all couples have the economic resources required to enact a traditional model of family life (Hochschild and Machung 1989). As material circumstances appear to play a significant role in family arrangements, future research could explore the expectations for parenthood of couples whose material circumstances do not allow for a SNAF family model. For example, couples where two full-time incomes are clearly needed; where the woman is the primary breadwinner; situations where one or both partners have experienced a job loss; or even an involuntary reduction in work hours.

Finally, incorporating gay and lesbian couples into future research on reproductive decision-making may provide valuable insights for two reasons. As noted in the literature review, some of the research on gay and lesbian couples and family decision-making suggests that these couples have a more equitable division of labour. As these couples cannot rely on traditional notions of “women’s work” and “men’s work” to guide their decisions on who is responsible for particular jobs, it would be interesting to explore how gay and lesbian couples discursively rationalize the division of labour in their households. It has also been suggested that lesbian women, because they face more obstacles to motherhood than heterosexual women, carefully consider their reproductive

choices before becoming mothers (Weston 1991 cited in Tietjens Meyers 2001).

Therefore, it would be interesting to explore whether gay and lesbian couples approach reproductive decision-making in the same way as the heterosexual couples in this study.

Research in all these directions would extend my close study of how couples engage with one of the most significant of all “family” decisions. I began this thesis with a comment from a prairie woman who explained that at the turn of the century birth control was unimaginable and children were more or less inevitable. As the accounts of the couples in this study demonstrate, this is clearly no longer the case. Having children is not a certainty anymore, and as a result contemporary couples are faced with the question of whether and/or when to have children. In an effort to resolve these issues couples engage in reproductive decision-making—the outcome of which promises to have a profound impact on their lives.

## References

- Agarwal, Bina. 1997. "'Bargaining' and Gender Relations: Within and beyond the Household." *Feminist Economics* 3:1-51.
- Allan, Graham. 1980. "A Note on Interviewing Spouses Together." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 42:205-210.
- Andersen, Margaret L. 1991. "Feminism and the American Family Ideal." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 22:235-246.
- Anderson, Elaine A. 1992. "Decision-Making Style: Impact on Satisfaction of the Commuter Couples' Lifestyle." *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 13:5-21.
- Barnett, Rosalind C., and Lena Lundgren. 1998. "Dual-Earner Couples and the Decision to Work Less: A Conceptual Model." *Community, Work and Family* 1:273-295.
- Baum, Frances. 1982. "Voluntarily Childless Marriages." *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 2:40-54.
- Baum, Frances E. 1983. "Orientations towards Voluntary Childlessness." *Journal of Biosocial Science* 15:153-164.
- Bennett, L. A., and K. McAvity. 1992. "Family research: A case for interviewing couples." Pp. 75-93 in *Qualitative methods in family research*, edited by J. F. Gilgun, K. Daly, and G. Handel. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Blain, Jenny. 1993. "'I Can't Come in Today, the Baby Has Chickenpox!' Gender and Class Processes in How Parents in the Labour Force Deal with the Problem of Sick Children." *Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers canadiens de sociologie* 18:405-429.
- Boroditsky, R., W. Fisher, and M. Sand. 1999. "The Canadian Contraceptive Study: a comprehensive survey of Canadian women's contraceptive attitudes and practices." *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 8:163-216.
- Causby, Vickie, Lettie Lockhart, Barbara White, and Kathryn Greene. 1995. "Fusion and Conflict Resolution in Lesbian Relationships." *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services* 3:67-82.
- CBC Trust. 2001. "Contraceptive Use in Canada." <http://www.cbctrust.com/contraceptive.html>

- Corijn, Martine , and Aart C. Liefbroer. 1996. "It takes two to tango, doesn't it? The influence of couple characteristics on the timing of the birth of the first child." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58:117-127.
- Currie, Dawn. 1988. "Re-Thinking What We Do and How We Do It: A Study of Reproductive Decisions." *Revue Canadienne de Sociologie et d'Anthropologie / Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 25:231-253.
- Currie, Dawn H. 1997. "Decoding Femininity: Advertisements and Their Teenage Readers." *Gender and Society* 11:453-477.
- Dietz, Thomas. 1984. "Normative and Microeconomic Models of Voluntary Childlessness." *Sociological Spectrum* 4:2-3.
- Dolan, Elizabeth M., and Marlene S. Stum. 1998. "Economic Security and Financial Management Issues Facing Same-Sex Couples." *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 19:343-365.
- Donovan, P. 1992. "Most Minors are Mature Enough to Make Their Own Abortion Decisions." *Family Planning Perspectives* 24:187-188.
- Dunne, Gillian A. 1998. "'Pioneers behind Our Own Front Doors': Towards Greater Balance in the Organisation of Work in Partnerships." *Work, Employment and Society* 12:273-295.
- Eichler, Margrit. 1981. "Power, Dependency, Love and the Sexual Division of Labour. A Critique of the Decision-Making Approach to Family Power and an Alternative Approach with an Appendix: On Washing My Dirty Linen in Public." *Women's Studies International Quarterly* 4:201-219.
- . 1996. "The Construction of Technologically-Mediated Families." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 27:281-308.
- Flick, Uwe. 1998. *An introduction to qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Fox, Bonnie. 1997. "Reproducing difference: Changes in the lives of partners becoming parents." Pp. 232 in *Feminism and families : critical policies and changing practices*, edited by Meg Luxton. Halifax, NS: Fernwood.
- . 2001. *Family patterns, gender relations*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- Gaskell, Jane. 2001. "The Reproduction of Family Life: Perspectives of Male and Female Adolescents." Pp. 217-232 in *Family Patterns, Gender Relations*, edited by Bonnie Fox. Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press.

- Gauthier, DeAnn K., Craig J. Forsyth, and William B. Bankston. 1993. "The Effects of Wife's Occupation on the Structure of Decision-Making Authority in the Offshore Oilworker's Family." *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* 23:87-98.
- Gerson, Kathleen. 1985. *Hard choices : how women decide about work, career, and motherhood*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 1993. *No man's land : men's changing commitments to family and work*. New York, NY: BasicBooks.
- Gillespie, Rosemary. 2000. "When no means no: Disbelief, disregard, and deviance as discourses of voluntary childlessness." *Women's Studies International Forum* 23:223-234.
- Godwin, Deborah D., and John Scanzoni. 1989. "Couple Consensus during Marital Joint Decision-Making: A Context, Process, Outcome Model." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 51:943-956.
- Hanks, Roma S. 1993. "Rethinking Family Decision Making: A Family Decision Making Model under Constraints on Time and Information." *Marriage and Family Review* 18:3-4.
- Hardill, Irene, Anne Green, Anna Dudleston, and David Owen. 1997. "Who Decides What? Decision Making in Dual-Career Households." *Work, Employment and Society* 11:313-326.
- Hertz, Rosanna. 1995. "Separate but simultaneous interviewing of husbands and wives: Making sense of their stories." *Qualitative Inquiry* 1:429-452.
- . 1997. "A Typology of Approaches to Child Care: The Centerpiece of Organizing Family Life for Dual-Earner Couples." *Journal of Family Issues* 18:355-385.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell, and Anne Machung. 1989. *The second shift : working parents and the revolution at home*. New York, N.Y.: Viking.
- Hollerbach, Paula E. 1980. "Power in Families, Communication, and Fertility Decision-Making." *Population and Environment* 3:146-173.
- Holstein, James A., and Jaber F. Gubrium. 1997. "Active Interviewing." Pp. 113-129 in *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice*, edited by David Silverman. London: Sage.
- Houseknecht, Sharon K. 1978. "Voluntary childlessness: a social psychological model." *Alternative Lifestyles* 1:379-402.



- iVillage.com. 2001. "Childfree by Choice.".: iVillage.com.  
<http://boards2.ivillage.com/messages/get/rlchildless16.html>
- Katz Rothman, Barbara. 1999. "Now you can choose! Issues in parenting and procreation." Pp. 399-415 in *Revisioning Gender*, edited by Myra Marx Ferree, Judith Lorber, and Beth B. Hess. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage publications.
- Kingsbury, Nancy M., and John Scanzoni. 1989. "Process Power and Decision Outcomes among Dual-Career Couples." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 20:231-246.
- Kranichfeld, Marion L. 1987. "Rethinking Family Power." *Journal of Family Issues* 8:42-56.
- LaRossa, R., L. Bennett, and R. Gelles. 1981. "Ethical dilemmas in qualitative family research." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 43:303-313.
- Machung, Anne. 1989. "Talking Careers, Thinking Job: Gender Differences in Career and Family Expectations of Berkeley Seniors." *Feminist Studies* 15:35-58.
- Mason, Jennifer. 1996. *Qualitative researching*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.
- McMahon, Martha. 1995. *Engendering motherhood : identity and self-transformation in women's lives*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Metz, Michael E., B. R. Simon Rosser, and Nancy Strapko. 1994. "Differences in Conflict-Resolution Styles among Heterosexual, Gay, and Lesbian Couples." *Journal of Sex Research* 31:293-308.
- Miller, Jody, and Barry Glassner. 1997. "The 'Inside' and the 'Outside': Finding Realities in Interviews." Pp. 99-112 in *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice*, edited by David Silverman. London: Sage.
- Miller, Warren B. 1986. "Proception: An important fertility behavior." *Demography* 23:579-594.
- Miller, Warren B., and David J. Pasta. 1996. "Couple Disagreement: Effects on the Formation and Implementation of Fertility Decisions." *Personal Relationships* 3:307-336.
- Mizan, Ainon N. 1994. "Family Power Studies: Some Major Methodological Issues." *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* 24:85-91.

- Namerow, P.B., D.S. Kalmuss, and L.F. Cushman. 1993. "The Determinants of Young Women's Pregnancy Resolution Choices." *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 3:193-215.
- Nave Herz, Rosemarie. 1989. "Childless Marriages." *Marriage and Family Review* 14:1-2.
- Owens, Jo. 1999. *Add kids, stir briskly, or, How I learned to love my life*. Victoria: Horsdal & Schubart Publishers.
- Parentsplace.com. 2001. "For our members in Alberta.".: iVillage.com. <http://boards2.parentsplace.com/messages/get/ppalberta72.html>
- Pentick, Julie, and Bonnie Johnson. 1999. "A perspective from the front lines: Commentary on the 1998 Canadian Contraception Study." *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 8:217-221.
- Perry Jenkins, Maureen, and Ann C. Crouter. 1990. "Men's Provider-Role Attitudes: Implications for Household Work and Marital Satisfaction." *Journal of Family Issues* 11:136-156.
- Ranson, Gillian. 1998. "Education, Work and Family Decision Making: Finding the "Right Time" to Have a Baby." *Revue Canadienne de Sociologie et d'Anthropologie / Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 35:517-533.
- Rasmussen, Linda, Lorna Rasmussen, Candace Savage, and Anne Wheeler. 1976. *A Harvest Yet To Reap: A History of Prairie Women*. Toronto: The Women's Press.
- Reilly, Mary Ellen, and Jean M. Lynch. 1990. "Power-Sharing in Lesbian Partnerships." *Journal of Homosexuality* 19:1-30.
- Rodman, Hyman. 1972. "Marital Power and the Theory of Resources in Cultural Context." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 3:50-70.
- Rovi, Susan L. D. 1994. "Taking "No" for an Answer: Using Negative Reproductive Intentions to Study the Childless/Childfree." *Population Research and Policy Review* 13:343-365.
- Rowland, Robyn. 1982. "An Exploratory Study of the Childfree Lifestyle." *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology* 18:17-30.
- Royal Commission on New Reproductive Technologies. 1993. "Proceed With Care." Pp. 2 volumes. Ottawa: Minister of Government Services Canada.

- Sandelowski, M., D. Holditch-Davis, and B. G. Harris. 1992. "Using qualitative and quantitative methods: The transition to parenthood of infertile couples." Pp. 301-322 in *Qualitative methods in family research*, edited by J. F. Gilgun, K. Daly, and G. Handel. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Seale, Clive. 1999. "Quality in Qualitative Research." *Qualitative Inquiry* 5:465-478.
- Silverman, David. 1993. *Interpreting qualitative data : methods for analysing talk, text and interaction*. London: Sage Publications.
- Smith, Dorothy E. 1993. "The Standard North American Family: SNAF as an Ideological Code." *Journal of Family Issues* 14:50-65.
- . 1999. *Writing the social : critique, theory, and investigations*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Sugarman, Leonie. 1985. "Dilemmas of the Childbearing Decision." *The Journal of the British Association for Counselling* 51:3-8.
- Sullivan, Maureen. 1996. "Rozzie and Harriet? Gender and Family Patterns of Lesbian Coparents." *Gender and Society* 10:747-767.
- Taylor, Verta A. 1996. *Rock-a-by baby : feminism, self-help, and postpartum depression*. New York: Routledge.
- Third Path 2001. <http://www.thirdpath.org>
- Tietjens Meyers, Diana. 2001. "The Rush to Motherhood - Pronatalist Discourse and Women's Autonomy." *Signs* 25:375-414.
- Trost, Jan. 1990. "Fertility and the Process of Decision Making." *Familjerapporter / Family Reports* 16:1-55.
- Valentine, Gill. 1999. "Doing household research: interviewing couples together and apart." *Area* 31:67-74.
- Veevers, Jean E. 1980. *Childless by Choice*. Toronto: Butterworths.
- Vogler, Carolyn. 1998. "Money in the Household: Some Underlying Issues of Power." *Sociological Review* 46:687-713.
- Warren, Keith C., and Ray W. Johnson. 1989. "Family Environment, Affect, Ambivalence and Decisions about Unplanned Adolescent Pregnancy." *Adolescence* 24:505-522.

Zvonkovic, Anisa M., Kathleen M. Greaves, Cynthia J. Schmiede, and Leslie D. Hall.  
1996. "The Marital Construction of Gender Through Work and Family Decisions:  
A Qualitative Analysis." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58:91-100.

## Appendix A

### Consent for interview

**Research Project Title: Choices and Conflicts: A Study of Reproductive Decision Making**

**Investigator:** Shelley Pacholok  
 Department of Sociology  
 University of Calgary

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

This project is required to complete a thesis for the purpose of obtaining a Master of Arts degree in Sociology at the University of Calgary. The intent of the study is to explore decision making in couples, specifically decisions about having children. The interview will begin with a general discussion of families and children and will move toward more specific questions about how you and your partner made decisions about whether, and/or when, to have children. You will be asked to describe how you and your partner made your decisions. In addition, you will be asked background questions about yourself.

Each interview will be tape-recorded, and later transcribed. If you choose to participate in the study every effort will be made to ensure that the information you provide will be kept confidential. Your name will not be attached to any of the recorded interview information. Information that may be potentially used to identify you will not appear in the thesis or any other published work. The interview notes will be accessible only to my supervisor, Dr. Gillian Ranson, and myself. The data will be kept in secured storage at all times. You should be aware, however, that any member of the university, as well as all interview participants, will be able to access the completed thesis if they desire. Further, as some of the participants may be chosen through my personal contacts it is possible that some participants may recognize the information given by other participants. Therefore, due to the detailed and personal nature of data provided in the interview, such data may be recognizable to other people even when names and other details are not attached. As a result, while every effort will be made to conceal your identity from the other participants in the study it cannot be guaranteed.

The interviews are expected to last approximately 1 hour. Although you may not benefit personally from your participation, the interview will provide you with an opportunity to express your feelings as they relate to your experience of reproductive decision making. Your experiences are valuable and have the potential to enrich the limited knowledge about the decision making process engaged in by many couples. If you decide to participate your time will be greatly appreciated.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation. If you have further questions concerning matters related to this research, please contact:

Investigator: Shelley Pacholok  
 Ph: 277-9086 (home)  
 220-3214 (work)  
 Supervisor: Dr. Gillian Ranson  
 Ph: 220-6511 (work)

If you have any questions or issues concerning this project that are not related to the specifics of the research, you may also contact the Chair, Department of Sociology Ethics Committee, at 220-6501.

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Investigator and/or Delegate's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

## Appendix B

### Thematic Interview: Participants without children (not planning)

#### Process of Reproductive Decision Making

Have you reached a decision as to whether or not you will have children?

When did you first start thinking about parenthood?

When did you and your partner first start talking about whether or not you wanted children?

Who was the first one to bring up children?

Who usually initiated the conversations?

Tell me about those conversations? i.e. What were some of the issues you discussed?  
Did these change over time?

Did you think about your own experiences as a child when you were making your decision(s)?

Was there a point when you felt that you had to make a “final”/firm decision about children? Why then?

Have you or your partner taken any permanent steps to prevent pregnancy?  
If no, what would you do if tomorrow you found out you/partner were pregnant?

Do you think that your decision about children was reached in a similar or different manner than other important decisions you have made?

#### General Questions about Parenthood

When you look at your friends/acquaintances that have children what do you think that being a parent is like?

What are the main reasons you chose not to have children?

How do you think your life would look right now if you had children? How about in 5-10 years?

What do you think it takes to be a good mother?  
What do you think it takes to be a good father?

Do you have any advice for couples (like me) who are undecided about having children?

If you had to do everything over again, would you do anything differently? What?

## Appendix C

### Thematic Interview: Participants without children (planning children)

#### Process of Reproductive Decision Making

Have you reached a decision as to whether or not you will have children?

When did you first start thinking about parenthood?

When did you and your partner first start talking about whether or not you wanted children?

Who was the first one to bring up children?

Who usually initiated the conversations?

Tell me about those conversations? i.e. What were some of the issues you discussed? Did these change over time? Did you talk about how many children you will have? How far apart?

Did you think about your own experiences as a child when you were making your decision(s)?

Was there a point when you felt that you had to make a final/firm decision one way or the other about children? Why then?

Do you think you will both be ready at the same time, or one before the other? Who do you think will be ready first? Why?

What would you do if you found out tomorrow that you/or partner were pregnant?

Do you think that your decision to have children was reached in a similar or different manner than other important decisions you have made?

Active interviewing - decision different in that it is permanent?

#### General Questions about Parenthood

When you look at your friends/acquaintances that have children what do you think that being a parent is like? Do you think it will be the same for you?

What are the most important reasons that you want to have children?

What if you found out that you were unable to have children? What would you do?

What do you think it takes to be a good mother?/father?

Do you have any advice for couples (like me) who are undecided about having children?

If you had to do everything over again, would you do anything differently? What?



## Appendix D

### Thematic Interview: Participants with children

#### Process of Reproductive Decision Making

When did you first start thinking about parenthood?

When did you and your partner first start talking about whether or not you wanted children?

Who was the first one to bring up children? Who usually initiated the conversations?

Tell me about those conversations? i.e. What were some of the issues you discussed?

Did these change over time? Did you talk about how many children you will have? How far apart?

Did you think about your own experiences as a child when you were making your decision(s)?

If undecided at some point - Was there a point when you felt that you had to make a final/firm decision one way or the other about children? Why then?

Were you both ready at the same time, or one before the other? Why do you think \_\_\_\_\_ was ready first?

Do you think that your decision to have children was reached in a similar or different manner than other important decisions you have made?

Active interviewing - decision different in that it is permanent?

#### Timing

How did you decide when to have a child? Why did you feel that that was the right time to have a baby? How did you decide that you were ready?

More than one child:

Why did you choose to have more than one child?

How did you decide on the timing of the second/third etc. child?

Do you plan on having more children?

#### General Questions about Parenthood

Do you have friends/family that have chosen not to have children? What do you think their lives are like?

**It's obvious from your situation that you were able to conceive children but what would you have done if you found out that you were unable to have children? Why go to all that trouble, why not say well that's life?**

**What are the most important reasons that you chose to have children?**

**What do you think it takes to be a good mother?/father?**

**Is parenthood like you expected it to be, or different?**

**Do you have any advice for couples (like me) who are undecided about having children?**

**Would you tell me to go for it?**

**If you had to do everything over again, would you do anything differently? What?**