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Communication Privacy Management within the Family Planning Trajectories of Voluntarily Child-Free Couples

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Abstract

Although the phenomenon of voluntary childlessness has garnered increased attention from researchers in a number of disciplines over the past 20 years (Connidis & McMullin, 1996; Letherby, 1998; Morrell, 1993; Park, 2002), little is known about the interaction processes that compose the family planning of couples who choose to remain child-free. In the present study, the researchers used Communication Privacy Management (Petronio, 2002) as the theoretical framework to describe the intradyadic communication processes that made up the family planning and decision making of voluntarily child-free couples. An interpretive analysis was performed on the transcripts of interviews with members of child-free couples. The researchers developed and described four different family-planning trajectories that illustrate the unique communicative pathways voluntarily child-free couples enacted as they engaged in family planning and arrived at a child-free decision.

The choice to remain child-free is a flashpoint in much of pronatalist American culture, as heterosexual couples who are able to reproduce are expected to do so (Park, 2002). The number of families choosing to remain child-free in the United States has been increasing steadily (Clausen, 2002; Paul, 2001; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001), and childlessness among women of childbearing age (15–44 years) has been on the rise over the past 20 years (Paul, 2001) with the percentage of married women who have chosen to remain voluntarily child-free (VCF) increasing from 2.4% in 1982 to 4.3% in 1995. As more couples choose to

remain child-free, acceptance of the child-free family has gained momentum, especially within highly educated and dual-earner demographic niches (Paul, 2001). Given the increasing incidence of child-free couples, few scholars have examined the family planning and, specifically, the communication of spouses who have made the decision to be child-free, and thus, this was the focus of the present study.

According to Thornton and Young-DeMarco (2001), there are two important factors related to the social acceptance of the child-free choice: (a) "oughtness" (whether married couples should have children), and (b) "emptiness of lives" (the degree of impact children have in the lives of parents). Although the VCF family form has gained greater acceptance in recent years, this must be weighed against the pronatalist social and cultural norms that are still pervasive in the United States. For example, in 1962, 85% of mothers believed that all married couples were obligated to reproduce. In contrast, the percentage of mothers who felt obligated to have children plummeted to 40% during the early 1980s, and, by 1994, 56% of women surveyed disagreed with the statement "people who never have children lead empty lives" (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001, p. 1020).

Researchers exploring VCF couples have taken three approaches. First, demographers (Paul, 2001) have measured the growth in incidence of VCF couples. However, taking this approach tells us very little about how these couples communicate and arrive at a child-free decision. Second, scholars have been interested in how VCF couples compare to other types of families (Ganong, Coleman, & Mapes, 1990; Heaton & Jacobson, 1999). Specifically, these researchers have compared the stigmatized nature of childlessness between VCF and infertile couples. A third approach to the study of VCF couples focuses largely on the identity implications of VCF women and the potential stigma they face if they choose to remain child-free (Morrell, 1993; Park, 2002).

By and large, researchers have yet to explore how VCF couples communicate during their family-planning decision-making processes and especially how these decisions are made over time. Researchers have suggested that the following individual attributes form the profile of many who are VCF: educational attainment, career status, and low levels of religiosity (Ganong, Coleman, & Mapes, 1990; Morrell, 1993; Park, 2002). When individuals decide they wish to remain child-free, they must still disclose and perhaps negotiate this decision with their spouse. Consequently, VCF decisions may not be "finalized" until both spouses agree or at least commit to not having children. As Durham (2004) discovered, family-planning negotiations can extend over a substantial period of time, and the spouses' commitment level to remaining child-free may fluctuate.

In sum, previous researchers have studied the prevalence, characteristics, and stigma of VCF couples; however, they have yet to investigate how, if at all, VCF couples communicate during their family-planning and decision-making processes, which was our focus in the present study. To follow, we argue for the theoretical underpinnings of the present study.

A Communication Privacy Management Perspective on VCF Couples

Over the last decade, family communication scholars have employed a Communication Privacy Management perspective (Petronio, 2002; Petronio & Caughlin, 2006; Petronio &

Durham, 2008) to understand varied disclosure and privacy phenomena (e.g., Golish & Caughlin, 2002; Greene, 2000). Due to the complex nature of family systems, disclosure processes and dilemmas represent sites for understanding the complex nature of marital and family communication, such as the family-planning processes of voluntarily child-free couples.

Fundamentally, Communication Privacy Management presumes that individuals have the "right to own and regulate access to their private information" (Petronio, 2002, p. 2) and that disclosure and privacy processes are rules-driven. According to Petronio (2002), the methods in which people reveal/conceal private information, and the manner in which boundaries are subsequently coordinated, can shift when the revelation of private information could lead to the stigmatization of the discloser(s). If negative reactions are anticipated by a discloser, he/ she may delay a disclosure or hint at the concealed information over time, which can prepare potential confidants for a disclosure. As Park (2002) discovered, VCF couples often find it difficult to reveal their family-planning decisions to family, friends, and colleagues on the basis of expected negative reactions from potential confidants. In the present study, however, it is our aim to discover the ways in which individuals reveal their VCF family-planning preferences to their spouse and, consequently, how disclosure processes lead to a VCF decision for the couple.

In sum, very little is known about how VCF couples interact within the dyad during the process of making their family-planning decision. Given the potential importance of family planning, understanding the decision not to reproduce and the communication surrounding it may be critical for couples and the professionals who might work with them throughout the process. Thus, our goal in the present study was to examine the intradyadic family-planning communication of VCF couples. The following *research question* guided the present study:

> How, if at all, do VCF couples disclose and interact during the process of making the decision to remain child-free?

Method

Because our goal was to understand communication and meaning-making for VCF couples, we approached the present study from the interpretive paradigm using qualitative methods via in-depth interviews (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). Interpretivists seek intelligibility and understanding as they identify the similarities in meanings that processes or phenomena hold for informants (Creswell, 1998; Leininger, 1994).

Participants
Qualitative researchers are most concerned with targeting a specific population that possesses certain qualities, attributes, or experiences encapsulated in the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 1998). In this exploratory study, we used a purposeful, homogeneous sampling technique (Creswell, 1998) focusing on the VCF family-planning communication of married heterosexual couples who self-reported that they were physically capable of having children but had chosen not to do so. The participants in the study ranged between

3 and 30 years of marriage (mean = 18.3 years) and the age of participants ranged from 30 years to 61 years old (mean = 49.7 years).

Qualitative researchers do not begin studies with a predetermined number of participants; rather, they collect data until theoretical saturation is attained (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Theoretical saturation occurs when the data are generating no new insights or properties, and, in the present study, we believed we had reached saturation after 20 interviews. However, mindful of wanting to generate a credible number of interviews and to address confirmability of the findings (Leininger, 1994), the choice was made to continue collecting data until 32 participants were interviewed, which yielded 1047 double-spaced pages of transcripts.

Data Collection

The present study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of a large, Midwestern university. Prior to each interview, participants were required to sign an informed consent form, which stated that all of their responses would be kept confidential and all participant names would remain anonymous. All interviews were conducted one-on-one with a single member of a VCF couple. If both spouses agreed to participate, they were interviewed separately (members of four couples were interviewed). Interviews were conducted by the first author in his office or over the telephone based on the convenience of the participants and the distance involved. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim, including nonlexical expressions and vocal pauses in order to remain close to the voices of the participants (Baxter & Babbie, 2004).

In order to focus on the process of interacting and making the decision not to have children, the interview guide employed the Retrospective Interview Technique (RIT) (Fitzgerald & Surra, 1981) using a turning point graph and interview. Based on the approach of previous relational and family communication researchers using this method (e.g., Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999; Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Olson, 2002), we used the RIT graph to serve as a visual model to display turning points reflecting the "child-free" decision-making of the couple. Modeled after extant studies, the RIT graph was composed of a vertical (or y) axis that indicated in percentages (0%–100%) how committed the couple was, at any one turning point, about remaining child-free. The horizontal (or x) axis indicated time in increments of months, starting at the couple's first date and ending at the point in time the child-free decision was finalized. Each participant was asked to recall his/her level of commitment to remaining child-free at each turning point, beginning with the participant's first family-planning interaction with his/her spouse. After each turning point was plotted, the interviewer asked the participant a series of in-depth questions about communication during that particular turning point. The process was repeated for each additional turning point.

Data Analysis

To answer the research question, the interview transcripts and RIT graphs were analyzed to categorize the turning points into trajectories, or the general patterns of the VCF family-planning process. The data in the present study were analyzed using a combination of analytic inductive and deductive processes. The approach taken here was first to analyze

the data apart from the imposed categories and constructs of a priori theory. In order to accomplish this task, the data were first analyzed using an inductive, grounded theory framework (Charmaz, 1995).

This method of data analysis requires that transcripts are in vivo coded in order to ascertain micro-level participant meanings. Therefore, the transcripts were analyzed line by line in order to insure that the researchers were staying true to the experiences of the participants (Charmaz, 1995) and from this analysis a typology of VCF couples was developed. These data were then analyzed in order to discern micro-themes through the process of collapsing line-by-line data into more substantial themes. These emergent themes indicated particular privacy and disclosure issues relating to the process, tone, satisfaction, and fallout of family-planning disclosures within VCF couples. During this second stage of data analysis, it became evident that the emergent themes reflected particular qualities of four CPM processes (Petronio, 2002) which composed the communication of couples choosing to remain child-free.

According to Baxter & Babbie (2004), it is possible for scholars to move between inductive and deductive forms of data analysis, particularly if inductively derived categories align with principles of an existing heuristic theory. Insofar that the inductively emergent themes signaled that CPM processes were composing the family-planning communication of the participants, once the VCF couple types were established, a decision was made to shift the data analysis procedures to a deductive approach using the following CPM processes as sensitizing concepts, as these processes were reflected in the data: (a) boundary coordination, the process whereby individuals co-own and co-manage private information; (b) message-centered coordination fit, the amount of congruence between a given disclosure and the implied or anticipated response; (c) issues of satisfaction, the degree satisfaction with the co-management of private information; and (d) boundary recalibration, the degree of change in the existing privacy boundaries following a disclosure or set of disclosures. Consequently, at this stage data analysis was designed to inform the findings as well as to extend the theoretical principles of CPM, as this theory serves as a heuristic tool for scholars studying the processes of revealing/concealing private information. Next, the CPM themes identified previously were written into preliminary draft form with each theme accounting for one analytic memo. Essentially, these memos were initial drafts of the findings.

Baxter (2001) argued that one way for researchers to understand how relationships progress over time is through identifying the major turning-point types within a given relationship stage. To this end, the RIT graphs were analyzed in order to categorize the turning points into trajectories, or the general patterns of the voluntarily child-free family-planning process. Researchers can develop trajectories qualitatively through the analysis of the "recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness" of relational themes (Owen, 1984; Siegert & Stamp, 1994).

In other words, trajectories emerge from the data when turning-point types and patterns of turning points reappear in the data. For instance, an evident link emerged from the graphs and transcripts regarding what each participant reported about the initial family-planning preferences within their couple and how family-planning disclosures actually occurred. The participants reported the following spousal combinations regarding family

planning: (a) both spouses come into the relationship independently wanting to remain child-free, (b) both spouses come into the relationship unsure of their family-planning decision, (c) one spouse independently wants to remain child-free and the other is undecided, and (d) one spouse wants to remain child-free and the other wants to reproduce. Based on these comparisons, there was ample evidence that, for these participants, the initial family-planning preferences within the couple influenced how these individuals disclosed family-planning information. The result of this type of recurrence and repetition within the data is four trajectories that account for the varied and unique disclosure processes that lead to a voluntary child-free outcome for the participants. These trajectories (accelerated-consensus, mutual-negotiation, unilateral-persuasion, and bilateral-persuasion) represent qualitatively different approaches to the disclosure processes that embody family planning for voluntarily child-free couples.

Qualitative researchers engage in several different types of verification and credibility procedures (Creswell, 1998; Philipsen, 1975; Stake, 1995). In the present study, we incorporated two primary verification methods: (a) investigator triangulation and (b) member checking (Creswell, 1998). First, after the initial data analysis was completed by the first and second authors, it was tested in a collaborative face-to-face data conference with three researchers trained in CPM theory and the interpretive paradigm. In the data conference, the scholars worked together to challenge and refine the analysis, which tested the validity of the findings (Maxwell, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Second, we engaged in the verification process of member checking, which allows researchers to discuss the findings with participants in order to ensure a more accurate depiction of the experiences of those who were studied (Creswell, 1998). To this end, the first author interviewed five participants from the original data set and delivered electronic questionnaires to eight other participants following their reading of the present manuscript. During the member checking process, at least one participant was interviewed from each trajectory presented in the results. The feedback from these interviews and electronic responses was positive, and participants indicated that the analysis successfully captured their experiences.

Results

To follow, we describe four trajectories that reflect the disclosure patterns of VCF couples during the family-planning process: (a) accelerated-consensus, (b) mutual-negotiation, (c) unilateral-persuasion, and (d) bilateral-persuasion. As indicated in Table 1, couples within each of the four trajectories arrive at the child-free decision differently based on the initial family-planning preferences of the spouses, the co-management of family-planning information, the characteristics of their disclosures, the overall degree of satisfaction with the process and decision, and the resultant degree of change in their privacy boundaries.

Table 1. An Overview of Four Family Planning Trajectories

Trajectory	Definition	Boundary Coordination	Coordination Fit	Issues of Satisfaction	Boundary Recalibration
Accelerated-Consensus	Similar child-free prefer-ences between spouses result-ing in few fam-ily planning disclosures and a quick consensus	Intersected Boundary Coordination: 1. Goal linkages 2. Identity linkages	Satisfactory fit	Generally, high levels of satisfaction	Very little needed
Mutual-Negotiation	Two spouses uncertain about family planning pref-erences result-ing in extend-ed, thorough family plan-ning conversa-tions across time	Intersected Boundary Coordination: 1. Goal linkages 2. Identity linkages	1. Satisfactory fit 2. Equivocal fit	Variable levels of satisfaction	Constant
Unilateral-Persuasion	A child-free-preferring spouse, over time, per-suades an un-decided spouse that the couple should remain child-free	Inclusive Role Linkages	1. Satisfactory fit 2. Deficient fit	Moderate and variable levels of satisfaction	Variable
Bilateral-Persuasion	Two spouses, one wanting children and one not, who do not agree on the child-free decision	Inclusive Coercive Linkages	Deficient fit	Generally, low levels of satisfaction	Variable

Accelerated-Consensus Trajectory

Participants in the accelerated-consensus trajectory described their intradyadic family-planning communication as consisting of very few family-planning discussions over a rel-atively short period of time. The participants in this trajectory claimed that they quickly reached consensus on being child-free because neither spouse had the desire to reproduce. These participants described that being child-free was central to their individual identities and, to a large extent, selected a romantic partner on the basis of this issue. These partici-pants often remarked that not having children was less selfish than reproducing, and they

linked the decision to remain childfree to larger global issues (e.g., global overpopulation and world hunger).

Individuals categorized into this trajectory explained that their desire to remain child-free informed many of their relational decisions, particularly those involving coupling. Accelerated consensus participants revealed their family-planning preferences extremely early on in their dating relationships and claimed that the child-free issue was a "breaking point" in previous relationships. By and large, these individuals, over the course of their dating lives, used the child-free topic as a criterion for mate-selection.

Because those in this trajectory approached the VCF issue as an important relational qualifier, it is understandable that those in this trajectory coupled with like-minded individuals and experienced little need to discuss the child-free issue after the initial conversations when both partners revealed their VCF preferences. Consequently, the individual VCF identities of those in the trajectory were transformed into dyadic VCF identities for the couples. In the sections to follow, we describe the boundary coordination and message-centered coordination fit of the participants representing the accelerated-consensus trajectory.

Intersected Boundary Coordination within Accelerated-Consensus Couples

According to Petronio (2002), "Intersected boundary coordination reflects an equitable measure of private information exchanged between people" (p. 132). From these data, intersected boundary coordination occurred in two ways for accelerated-consensus couples. First, intersected boundary coordination occurred through the process of goal linkages (Petronio, 2002), whereby boundaries are coordinated on the basis of a mutually desired outcome. For accelerated-consensus couples, being child-free represented a mutual goal that requires collective effort from both spouses. Second, intersected boundary coordination occurred through the process of identity linkages (Petronio, 2002), whereby boundaries are coordinated based on similar worldviews or experiences. For accelerated-consensus couples, these identity linkages allowed them to openly discuss information based on similar experiences or worldviews, for example, having to help raise their own siblings. In these examples, the similar worldview of these couples helped them to negotiate child-free decisions comparatively quickly, easily, and equitably.

Goal Linkages

For accelerated-consensus couples, goal linkages, or mutually desired outcomes, enable spouses to have equal control over family-planning disclosures. One 30-year-old female participant described how she and her spouse discussed being VCF as a mutually agreed-upon goal:

> He and I just wanted to make sure we were on the same page. He wanted to make sure that I was comfortable with the fact that he didn't want to have kids. He just said "Hey, I just want to make sure you understand because I don't need them to come from me." And I said, "I'm fine." And also, I said that if he was open to giving emotional support to other kids. And he's like, "Oh yeah, because

that's something important to me." So it was a compromise for us. It was a compromise about us not having a kid. (1: 143–145; 162–167; Note: these numbers reflect the participant and line numbers from the transcript)

The spouses arrived at the mutually agreed-upon outcome of not reproducing; however, for this participant and her spouse, the child-free decision did not translate into a life absent of children.

Reconfirming the child-free decision represented another aspect of goal linkage processes for accelerated-consensus couples. In the present data, accelerated-consensus participants reported that they engaged in "check-in" disclosures earlier in the relationship in order to ensure that their child-free goal remained stable for both spouses. One 58-year-old male participant described how these check-in conversations occurred for him and his wife:

> I think it was more in her head that she wanted to confirm that I wasn't interested in kids, and I think I pretty much confirmed that by saying, "No, and I have no history of ever wanting kids and it is very, very clear cut in my head with no gray area whatsoever." So it was a very short conversation. (13: 228–231)

"Check-in" conversations allow the couple to periodically revisit the issue of family planning and were relatively short and goal-directed. Unlike couples in other trajectories, accelerated-consensus couples used "check-in" conversations as a reconfirmation of their child-free decision.

Identity Linkages

Identity linkage processes, the processes whereby individuals who possess similar experiences or worldviews share private information in similar amounts (Petronio, 2002), allowed accelerated-consensus couples to disclose equitably about their past experiences or worldviews. While goal linkage processes allowed couples to discuss being child-free as an attainable outcome, identity linkage processes enabled them to provide rationales for not wanting children based on their experiences and personal ideologies. In the example to follow, a 30-year-old woman explained that her husband's perception of children would not allow him to commit the time and energy that parenting required:

> He doesn't like kids. He doesn't like kids. He recognizes that many people don't like kids until they have their own, and then their attitudes change . . . But he just doesn't want kids. I guess you could say that it's fairly selfish in the sense that he doesn't want to commit the time and the energy. (1: 70–79)

As this participant explained, her husband's previous experiences with children led him to not want to have any children of his own. Fortunately, this participant agreed with her husband's inclination not to reproduce, and the couple quickly arrived at a child-free decision.

Accelerated-consensus couples used goal linkages and identity linkages as reinforcements and reconfirmations of their VCF decision. They considered what parenting would entail and discussed family-planning issues not in terms of how it is responsible to reproduce, but, instead, how it is responsible to *not* reproduce. These disclosures fortified their child-free decisions during the family-planning process.

Message-Centered Coordination Fit within Accelerated-Consensus Couples

To follow, we describe the message-centered coordination fit (satisfactory fit), the issues of satisfaction that accelerated-consensus couples have with satisfactory fit disclosure sequences, and how accelerated-consensus couples recalibrate their privacy boundaries following these sequences.

Satisfactory Fit

Accelerated-consensus couples engaged in satisfactory coordination sequences when disclosing their child-free desires. Satisfactory fit refers to a direct, unambiguous set of disclosures, where the partner's response to the disclosure is embedded in the message (Petronio, 2002). For accelerated-consensus couples, disclosures with satisfactory fit involved an unambiguous disclosure with the spouse's reply implied in the disclosure. In other words, when one spouse disclosed his/her family-planning desires, their disclosure implies that the other spouse would agree with the original disclosure. To follow, a 30-year-old woman described a situation that exemplifies this disclosure sequence:

> He [my husband] hates kids. So he doesn't understand why people take their kids in public because all they do is scream. If we're out and somebody's kid is screaming, he says "Oh my gosh . . . I don't want kids." And I say, "I know. I know you don't want kids." And that's about it. They're not long, drawn out conversations. (1: 233–234; 360–366)

The preceding excerpt represents a satisfactory fit coordination sequence insofar that the husband's initial disclosure suggests how this participant should reply. These disclosures comprised brief conversations that reflected and reinforced the child-free decision of the couple.

Satisfactory coordination sequences are comprised of explicit, direct disclosures (Petronio, 2002). Consequently, when engaging in satisfactory fit, individuals must be explicit and unambiguous in their initial disclosures. One 60-year-old male participant described how he used unambiguous disclosures with his wife when they began their family-planning process. He characterized "being up front" as a key to their family planning and eventual child-free decision:

> It wasn't like she was all for having a child and she had to accept my verdict on the issue. It was a negotiation of a very minor degree with a pretty firm understanding right from the beginning that she knew. It was never an issue that was covered up. (28: 84–87)

This participant made his position on being child-free apparent to his wife early in their dating relationship through the disclosures that he used during the family-planning process. Due to his use of a satisfactory coordination sequence, he and his wife came to a consensus on being child-free early on in their dating relationship.

The participants in the accelerated-consensus trajectory consistently described their family-planning communication as positive and productive due to the use of direct, unambiguous disclosures. These participants attributed their positive experiences during the family-planning process to two features: (a) both spouses had an orientation prior to the relationship to not reproduce, and (b) they disclosed their family-planning desires openly to their spouse early in their relationship. One 30-year-old female participant described the nature of her family-planning conversations with her husband:

> They're always very friendly. They're always very open . . . it's mostly us discussing the troubles that our brothers and sisters have with their kids. It's discussing the issues they are facing and how we might help, and it just kinda leads into how we don't want our own kids. (1: 376–380)

Accelerated-consensus participants in the present study expressed satisfaction with their child-free decision due, in large part, to both spouses' desire not to reproduce and their enduring commitment to the decision, thus the couples were not forced to recalibrate their privacy boundaries on the issue.

In sum, from our analysis of these data, we characterized participants as belonging to an accelerated-consensus couple if: (a) the participants perceived both members of the couple coming into the relationship with a child-free orientation, and (b) the participants perceived the decision-making power over the couple's reproductive decision as distributed equally between both spouses. Because both spouses in accelerated-consensus couples had similar family-planning preferences prior to the relationship, these couples made their child-free decisions with relative ease, and they experienced rapid boundary coordination.

Mutual-Negotiation Trajectory

Unlike those described in the accelerated-consensus trajectory, the participants classified in the mutual-negotiation trajectory came into their relationship without a particular family-planning preference. Individuals in this trajectory are characterized by a relative long-term uncertainty about their family-planning decisions. Whereas individuals in the accelerated-consensus trajectory described their child-free status as being inextricably linked to their identities and political philosophies, those classified in the mutual-negotiation trajectory reported hesitancy and dissonance about family planning and reported that while being in a VCF couple does inform their identity, this identity has taken years to develop and has emerged largely from positive and negative interpersonal interactions with others.

Some of those in this trajectory commented that they remain unsure about and continue to question their ultimate VCF decision even though they have finalized the decision through undergoing surgical sterilization. However, like those described in the accelerated-consensus trajectory, those in the mutual-negotiation trajectory also married a like-minded

spouse insofar that neither member of the couple had definite initial plans on family planning. Participants in the mutual-negotiation trajectory described their intradyadic family-planning communication as a negotiations occurring over an extended period of time, where the couple considered the aspects of reproducing and remaining child-free. Couples in the mutual-negotiation trajectory took longer periods of time to commit to a child-free decision and periodically revisited the topic of family planning. In the sections to follow, we describe the boundary coordination and message-centered coordination fit of couples within in the mutual-negotiation trajectory.

Intersected Boundary Coordination with Mutual-Negotiation Couples

Similar to the accelerated-consensus couples, for mutual-negotiation couples, intersected boundary coordination can occur through the processes of goal linkages and identity linkages. Ultimately, the decision not to have children invoked other goals that the couples prioritized, such as economic freedom. Identity linkage processes, such as worldviews and personal experiences with children, impacted how these couples discussed their reproductive alternatives.

Goal Linkages

For mutual-negotiation couples, the family-planning process consisted of the spouses discussing the pros and cons of parenthood and of being voluntarily child-free. Mutual-negotiation couples used goal linkage processes in order to determine what their reproductive goals would be. Unlike accelerated consensus couples who begin their relationship with their family-planning goals already solidified, mutual-consensus couples interacted to establish those goals. According to one 45-year-old male participant:

> It wasn't just a talk about family planning but it was sort of a talk about what we had in mind for our future, and I don't think it was like, "We're not gonna have kids." But when we were talking about what we saw for ourselves, we managed to have a discussion about what kind of house we were going to live in and what we might be doing, and kids weren't in that picture. (23: 16–23)

As this excerpt demonstrates, mutual-consensus couples occasionally arrive at their family-planning goals through discussing other life decisions. In discussing how they want to live their lives, some couples decide that children do not fit into that picture.

Mutual-negotiation couples considered the different potential ramifications of their reproductive decisions. Not mentioned in any of the current literature on VCF families is a discussion of marital strain associated with parenthood. During the family-planning process, many mutual negotiation couples considered how their reproductive decisions would affect their marriage. According to one 48-year-old male participant:

> Generally, we talked about the rewards, benefits, and joys of being a parent. But we were certainly able to rattle off hundreds of the cons. The stresses, the inconveniences, the negatives of being a parent. We would talk deep down about what we thought was best for us. Is raising children, having children, going through

childbirth and the toil and trouble and stress and insomnia really going to help us? And plus, a big factor was just a concern for stress on our marriage. (10: 286–295)

Clearly, this man perceived that having children would hamper his relationship with his wife. During the family-planning process, mutual-negotiation couples discuss a number of ways that children could impact their lives. While researchers have claimed that VCF couples are interested first and foremost in the economic strain or time commitment that children create (Morrell, 1993; Park, 2002), several of the participants classified in the mutual-negotiation trajectory also considered potential negative relational ramifications before deciding not to have children.

Identity Linkages

Like accelerated-consensus couples, mutual-negotiation couples engaged in identity linkage processes that underscored their worldviews and past experiences with children. Mutual-negotiation couples used identity linkage processes in order to rationalize their reproductive decisions. These couples discussed many external forces, such as child welfare, overpopulation, and negative experiences with children when they weighed the pros and cons of reproduction. One 41-year-old female participant described how she and her husband discussed the issues of bringing up children in contemporary society:

Both of us are pretty skeptical about what has been happening in our own country as well as around the world. It's not that it's a dangerous place; the safety wasn't the issue. It just seems like a pretty nasty place to bring a kid in some ways. And as [my husband] and I began to talk about if our kid asked us this question or that question . . . what would we say? We realized that the world is so complex that we really don't have the answers and that terrified both of us . . . the idea that we would be the people responsible for teaching this young person right from wrong, for instilling morals, for teaching this person how to be a democratic citizen . . . all the things we really felt like our parents had done wonderful jobs with. As things began to internationally and politically get more complicated, that kind of stuff scared us, and, quite frankly, I doubted my ability to be a good parent, and at some levels I realize that that is a completely idiotic thing to say. (34: 86–97)

Mutual-negotiation couples analyzed their own abilities as potential parents focusing on how they could nurture a child in a complex society where external forces can create problems that remain out of their control. The mutual-negotiation participants in the present study situated their child-free decisions not only in their personal lives but also in a sociopolitical arena as well.

Message-Centered Coordination Fit within Mutual-Negotiation Couples

Because of the variable amounts of uncertainty that surrounded the child-free decision for mutual-negotiation couples, participants categorized in the mutual-negotiation trajectory described using two message-centered coordination fit sequences during the family-planning

process. First, like accelerated-consensus couples, some mutual-negotiation couples occasionally used satisfactory fit (direct, unambiguous disclosures where the response is indicated in the original disclosure) when disclosing their family-planning preferences. Second, some mutual negotiation couples used equivocal fit, which refers to the use of an ambiguous disclosure followed by an ambiguous response (Petronio, 2002). In these data, equivocal fit coordination sequences reflected the hesitant nature of making a definitive family-planning decision.

Satisfactory Fit

Mutual-negotiation couples tended not to engage in as many direct, unambiguous disclosures as did the accelerated-consensus couples due to the increased amount of hesitancy that mutual negotiation couples exhibited during the family-planning process. In the cases where mutual negotiation participants claimed to use satisfactory fit, they did so for different reasons than accelerated-consensus couples. For instance, accelerated-consensus participants claimed to use satisfactory fit coordination sequences based on the amount of agreement within the couple on remaining child-free. On the other hand, mutual-negotiation participants claimed to use satisfactory fit coordination sequences due to previous or current marital problems, which, according to mutual-negotiation participants, necessitated more direct disclosures on family planning.

Relational problems for mutual negotiation couples represented rare situations that fostered satisfactory fit coordination sequences. For example, one 53-year-old male participant described a conversation that he and his spouse had during a tumultuous point in their marriage:

> I think it probably was brought up by me I think, I said, "What do you think about kids? I think, you know, maybe I'd kind of like to have a daughter at this point." And [my wife] said, "Well, you know we've got dogs at this point, and sometimes we disagree on how to bring them up, and I think we're going to have trouble you know, I just don't want a child," and I think that's kind of how it went. (4: 133–139)

Only in the rare occasions of previous or current relational turbulence did individuals in the mutual-negotiation trajectory use satisfactory fit when discussing family planning. In most all other descriptions provided by the mutual-negotiation participants, they characterized their and their spouse's initial disclosures as relatively ambiguous.

Equivocal Fit

The use of equivocal-fit coordination sequences by mutual-negotiation couples reflected the amount of uncertainty that these couples exhibited concerning their reproductive choices throughout the family-planning process. Mutual-negotiation participants described that one of the most important coordination sequences during the family-planning process was that of "feeling their spouse out" on reproductive issues. Because both spouses in mutual-negotiation couples entered their relationships reasonably undecided about their family-planning preferences, persons in this trajectory attempted to gauge where

they and their partner stand on reproductive issues. The use of ambiguous disclosures in order to solicit a spouse's family-planning preference was common in these data, and they believed this ambiguity would allow them to later change their position on the child-free issue if warranted. Although equivocal fit coordination sequences do little to concretize a family-planning decision, the use of ambiguous disclosures during the family-planning process can decrease the amount of pressure that a couple feels when they attempt to make family-planning decisions, as this 45-year-old male participant indicated:

> I can say for what it's worth . . . it's important that the decision was joint one that one, of one not pressuring the other. It's important for me to know where [my wife] is headed from time to time just like it is important to me know about other things as well. I don't want to assume that something she said five years ago is something that I still take for granted to be true, because it may or may not be. (23: 344–349)

Through the use of ambiguous disclosures, the couples allowed themselves to discuss family-planning issues over a long period of time without the risk of initiating arguments or conflict. Consequently, mutual-negotiation couples arrive at a consensus on remaining child-free after carefully exploring their family-planning options. These equivocal fit sequences were subtle, nuanced exchanges that assisted in the couples arriving at and reinforcing their family-planning decision.

The participants in the mutual-negotiation trajectory described their family-planning communication with their spouse as generally positive exchanges; however, compared to accelerated-consensus couples, the mutual-negotiation participants described the process as being inherently more stressful because both spouses wavered on their family-planning preferences throughout the process. According to one 36-year-old female participant:

> I think for the most part we have talked about things enough that when we've had points of disagreement, we've just been as upfront as possible about them. You know, like, [my husband] has never said, "No . . . I don't want children," even though I know that he is so happy to not have children. And I have never stomped my feet and said, "But right now, I want one right now." I think we know we've been a little bit far apart on this at some points. We try to understand where the other person is coming from, while also maintaining our own perspective. And it's been pretty stressful. (8: 992–1001)

Considering the degrees of reluctance and uncertainty that characterizes the family-planning communication of mutual-negotiation couples, the majority of the mutual-negotiation participants in the present study claimed they and their spouse were satisfied with the child-free decision after they arrived at a consensus. Equivocal fit sequences, as illustrated by the previous excerpt, allowed the couple to discuss the stressful topic of family planning in a way that curbed potential conflict. Due to the subtle and egalitarian nature of these disclosures, mutual negotiation couples were able to navigate potentially problematic discussions more effectively.

Mutual-negotiation participants explained they become satisfied with their child-free decision after they (a) arrive at a definitive decision on the child-free issue, and (b) have that decision reinforced through revisiting family-planning topics. A 41-year-old female participant explained:

> There's hardly a week that goes by that [my husband] and I don't look at each other and say we made the right decision, and sometimes we just sit there and laugh hysterically about it because our friends are just going through night-mares. We're not laughing at them, but, you know, it's just kind of tension relief. (34: 252–255)

The majority of the mutual-negotiation participants found the family-planning process stressful. Therefore, after the couples make their child-free decisions, they were able to enjoy being childfree and periodically interacted and reinforced their reproductive decisions.

In sum, from our analysis of these data, we characterized participants as belonging to a mutual-negotiation couple if both members of the couple came into the relationship undecided or ambivalent about their reproductive preferences. Participants within this trajectory claimed to have equity in reproductive decisions. The family-planning interactions for mutual-negotiation couples extended over substantial amounts of time due to relative amounts of uncertainty concerning their family-planning preference. The way in which mutual-negotiation couples revealed their family-planning preferences intradyadically differed greatly from those in accelerated consensus couples. Participants categorized in the mutual-negotiation trajectory used ambiguous disclosures so they could "feel their spouse out" on issues of family planning and remain relatively noncommittal about the family-planning decision.

Unilateral-Persuasion Trajectory

Participants in the unilateral-persuasion trajectory described their intradyadic family-planning communication as a process of persuasion whereby one spouse, committed to remaining child-free, convinces an undecided spouse that a child-free decision is the correct option for the couple. Unlike the accelerated-consensus and mutual-negotiation trajectories, the amount of disclosure and control over the information between the spouses was unequal in unilateral-persuasion couples. In this trajectory, the spouse who advocated remaining child-free enacted greater power and influence over family-planning conversations, based primarily on the strength of their conviction to remain child-free. In addition, the undecided spouse engaged in fewer disclosures during family planning, and, ultimately had less control over the private information disclosed during family planning. Interestingly, those who were categorized in this trajectory had one other important issue in common: the undecided spouse was male and the child-free advocating spouse was female. In several instances, female participants in this trajectory claimed that their spouse believed they could "wait out" the child-free phase and that eventually these women would give in to maternal forces.

Participants in this trajectory claimed that their family-planning process, in general, was characterized by mild unpleasantness and the use of ultimatums. Unlike those described in the previous two trajectories, these couples are composed of spouses who have different family-planning perspectives. Consequently, those in this trajectory, in varying degrees, described instances of conflict, guilt, and passive-aggressive behavior in family-planning discussions with their spouse. Moreover, because of the lack of agreement over family planning at the onset of their relationships, these participants also discussed the family-planning process as having more of a tangible impact on their overall relationship with their spouse. In the sections to follow, we describe the boundary coordination and message-centered coordination sequences provided by the participants in the unilateral-persuasion trajectory.

Inclusive Role Linkages within Unilateral-Persuasion Couples

According to Petronio (2002), inclusive role linkages represent a boundary coordination process characterized by the unequal power between two parties to make disclosures and control private information. Because of the strong position taken by the spouse advocating a child-free status, the undecided spouse took on a more passive role in unilateral-persuasion couples. Consequently, the child-free advocating spouse had greater power to disclose and control information regarding family planning. In the present study, all of the participants categorized in the unilateral persuasion trajectory indicated they belonged to a couple with a child-free advocating wife and an undecided or ambivalent husband. In the following excerpt, one 46-year-old male participant explained how he and his wife discussed the prospect of having children:

> [My wife] was pretty demonstrative in her desire not to have children. She wanted to make sure that I was not set on having kids because that would have been a deal killer. That's something you really can't come to a middle ground on. When one person says, "Well, you know, I don't want to have kids," and the other person says, "You know, I want to have children" . . . that's a problem. Consequently, I caved in. I was just pretty noncommittal about it. (31: 56–77)

In the above excerpt, due to the strength of the wife's position, the husband accepted that in order to be in the relationship with her, he had to commit to the child-free decision.

Inclusive role linkage processes account for particular roles of power in any given disclosure situation. Stereotypically, women have held the role of primary caregiver for offspring in the United States. Park (2002) claimed that members of VCF couples typically hold nontraditional sex roles that challenge those traditional role expectations of women. In the unilateral-persuasion trajectory, women refused the motherhood role and engaged in persuading their husbands to commit to a child-free decision. One 43-year-old female participant described how she explained her child-free position to her husband:

> We did actually sit down one day. I said, "You know, you're the one who wants kids more than I would. And if we had a child would you be willing to take care of this child 50% of the time?" I said, "I'm not asking for more than 50%," . . . and

I think he finally said, "30%." He could firmly commit himself to taking care of a child 30% of the time. And I said, "Don't you think there's something wrong with this picture that if you're the one that wants the child more than I do, but yet you're expecting me to take care of the child at least 70% of the time?" Something's wrong with that picture. We did have fewer chats about family planning following that. (24: 101–111; 114)

In the previous excerpt, this participant demonstrated how inclusive role linkages operate within a couple, as her direct and unambiguous disclosures about family planning are met with uncertain responses from her spouse. Moreover, this excerpt demonstrates that the female participant is enacting power over the disclosure process, in effect laying out criteria about how having children "could happen" and under what circumstances the topic of family planning can be revisited. The participants in the unilateral-persuasion trajectory perceived that the women held power over the family-planning communication and, ultimately, the child-free decision.

Message-Centered Coordination Fit within Unilateral-Persuasion Couples
Unilateral-persuasion couples used two primary coordination sequences during their child-free family-planning processes. Like accelerated-consensus and mutual-negotiation couples, unilateral persuasion couples engage in satisfactory fit coordination sequences, a direct set of disclosures where the response is reflected in the original disclosure. Unilateral-persuasion couples also use deficient fit coordination sequences during the family-planning process. According to Petronio (2002), deficient fit refers to a direct, unambiguous set of disclosures met with an unambiguous response. Because unilateral-persuasion couples were a child-free advocating spouse and an undecided spouse, in cases of deficient fit, the child-free advocate used direct, unambiguous disclosures to persuade the undecided spouse on the child-free decision.

Satisfactory Fit
When participants in the unilateral persuasion trajectory claimed they and their spouse used satisfactory fit coordination sequences, the child-free decision was reached more expeditiously than if they used deficient fit coordination sequences. In this trajectory, the use of satisfactory fit referred to the child-free advocating spouse engaging in direct, unambiguous disclosures wherein the undecided spouse's response was reflected in the original disclosures. In other words, early in the relationship, the child-free advocating spouse would clearly explain that the child-free issue was nonnegotiable, leaving the undecided spouse to either accept the child-free option or terminate the relationship. In the following excerpt, a 49-year-old female participant's discourse demonstrated how satisfactory fit was enacted during the family-planning process in order to ensure that her and her husband agreed on the child-free decision:

I remember before we got married having a serious conversation with him and saying, "Really think about this because I feel like I'm taking away your life

> chance of having a family. So if you want to do that, if that's something you want to do, we need to rethink this marriage." (33: 34–37)

Through the use of direct, unambiguous disclosures, in effect an ultimatum, the child-free advocating spouses were able to quickly persuade their undecided spouses about a child-free decision. In addition, other unilateral-persuasion couples engaged in deficient fit co-ordination sequences.

Deficient Fit

Unilateral-persuasion couples who engaged in deficient fit coordination sequences had a more difficult process reaching a consensus on the child-free issue. Unlike unilateral-persuasion couples who used satisfactory fit, here the undecided spouse responded to a direct, unambiguous set of disclosures from the child-free advocating spouse with an ambiguous response. As one 43-year-old female participant described below, her undecided spouse displayed reluctance to commit to the child-free decision:

> I had always told him, "Hey! You want kids; get rid of me now before I get attached to you . . . cause it's not going to happen." He wasn't ready to say, "No. I definitely I want kids." He was like, "You know we happen to have one that's fine, we don't that's okay." (24: 56–57; 94–96)

Several participants in the unilateral-persuasion trajectory that preferred to remain child-free expressed frustration with the ambiguous and contradictory responses of their undecided spouses. Despite the ambiguous responses child-free advocating spouses received, they repeatedly discussed the importance of being straightforward with their spouse on wanting to remain child-free.

Unlike accelerated-consensus and mutual-negotiation couples, unilateral-persuasion couples do not always view their family-planning process positively. Participants believed that the undecided spouses in unilateral-persuasion couples would have reproduced if they had been in relationships with spouses who wanted children. Consequently, the varied levels of satisfaction in this trajectory are representative of (a) whether the participant was a child-free advocating spouse or an undecided spouse, and (b) the amount of guilt the child-free advocating spouse felt about having most of the decision-making power. In unilateral-persuasion couples, most of the child-free advocating spouses expressed satisfaction with the family-planning process, due, in large part, to the fact that their family-planning preferences were privileged.

In sum, from our analysis of these data, we characterized participants as belonging to a unilateral-persuasion couple if one spouse within the couple wanted to remain child-free while the other spouse was ambivalent or undecided about his/her family-planning preference. The family-planning power in unilateral-persuasion couples was distributed unequally with the spouse wanting to remain child-free persuading the ambivalent spouse to accept the child-free decision. For unilateral-persuasion couples, often the spouse wanting to re-

main child-free used direct and unambiguous disclosures in order to persuade the ambivalent spouse; however, ambivalent or undecided spouses often engaged in more ambiguous disclosures until convinced of the child-free decision.

Bilateral-Persuasion Trajectory

Participants in the bilateral-persuasion trajectory described their intradyadic family-planning communication as emotionally heated, negatively charged conversations where the spouses disagreed completely on their family-planning decisions. These couples consisted of one spouse who was committed to the child-free decision and another spouse who was committed to having children. Of the participants categorized in this trajectory, all were spouses who wanted to reproduce and believed, incorrectly, they could sway the child-free advocating spouse to have children. The spouse who wanted children remained committed to his/her spouse; however, he/she never committed to the child-free decision and would have children if married to someone else. Like those participants in the unilateral-persuasion trajectory, these participants described family-planning as a difficult process that created relational turmoil. However, while the relational strain described by those in the unilateral-persuasion trajectory was relatively mild, those in the bilateral-persuasion trajectory described family-planning discussions as highly infrequent but, when they did occur, extremely heated and combative.

   Also, unlike those individuals in other trajectories who wanted to remain child-free, the VCF advocating individuals here were reported as generally "disliking" children on the basis of highly negative personal experiences. These participants expressed that intradyadic family-planning disclosures were infrequent and highly contested. In the sections to follow, we describe the boundary coordination and message-centered coordination fit described by the three participants in the bilateral-persuasion trajectory.

Inclusive Coercive Linkages within Bilateral-Persuasion Couples
The participants in the present study categorized in the bilateral-persuasion trajectory used inclusive coercive linkages when discussing family-planning issues. Inclusive coercive linkages represent boundary coordination that occurs between two or more people of unequal power whereby one person has ultimate control over disclosing and managing private information (Petronio, 2002). In the present study, when using inclusive coercive linkages, one spouse controlled the boundary rules pertaining to family planning. The child-free advocating spouse made unilateral family-planning decisions, while the spouse who favored reproduction was relegated to tolerate the child-free "verdict." Moreover, through using inclusive coercive linkages and deficient fit coordination sequences, the VCF-wanting spouse not only controlled the family-planning decision, but also how the couple disclosed about the topic within the dyad.

   The unequal input of both spouses represented the major point of contention in the family-planning communication of bilateral-persuasion couples. The child-wanting spouse felt deprived of the right to communicate his/her position on family planning. One 41-year-old female participant discussed her frustration with having little say in her reproductive choices:

I think if we had both sat down at the table and openly discussed it and come to a conclusion together, I think I would have been absolutely fine with the decision that was made and probably agreed with it 95%. But the fact that I didn't really have a say in the matter, that I was told what the decision was going to be, that I resented it for a little while. (9: 242–246)

Spouses in bilateral-persuasion couples who wanted to reproduce expressed resentment over having their family-planning decisions made for them by their child-free advocating spouses, and these participants spoke of far more relational stress over family planning than the participants in the other three trajectories. A significant amount of this relational stress was derived not from the actual family-planning "decision," but rather from the disclosive and communicative moves made by their partners that confined their communication to uncertain and ambiguous responses.

Message-Centered Coordination Fit within Bilateral-Persuasion Couples
Bilateral-persuasion couples used deficient fit coordination sequences when discussing their family-planning preferences. The child-free advocating spouse unambiguously disclosed his/her decision to remain child-free, which was followed by the child-wanting spouse disclosing an ambiguous response. In bilateral-persuasion couples, the child-free advocating spouse held a position of power during the family-planning process as they were so adamant in their child-free stance and controlled when and how much family planning was discussed.

Deficient Fit
The participants categorized in the bilateral-persuasion trajectory characterized the family-planning process as unpleasant because of (a) incompatible positions on family planning, and (b) incompatible coordination sequences used by the spouses. Deficient fit, within the bilateral persuasion trajectory, represents a disclosure process whereby the child-free advocating spouse used direct, unambiguous disclosures that are met by the ambiguous responses of the spouse who favored reproduction. The asymmetry found in the disclosures of the spouses within the bilateral-persuasion trajectory further divided these couples on family-planning issues. In the following excerpt, one 41-year-old female participant described how her husband controlled all of the family-planning conversations: "Well either he avoided it or he once again did the short, adamant, 'I want no children, if you want children you're barking up the wrong tree, go somewhere else. What's your decision?' That's the dictatorship of it" (9: 651–653).

According to this participant, when met with these short, confrontational disclosures from her spouse, she often responds in more ambiguous and uncertain ways. For instance, she claimed, "I don't push the subject [after he discloses about family planning]; just drop the subject, and let's move on. I could never argue with him when [he] was like that. I just tried to stay open to the idea" (9: 216–217; 295–296). The use of direct disclosures by child-free advocating spouses was accompanied by very few family-planning conversations and resentment from their child wanting spouses. In particular, the resentment experienced by

the child-wanting spouse was amplified based on how the VCF-wanting spouse limited the response to family-planning disclosures. As illustrated by the previous excerpts, it is clear that this participant continued wanting children, but on the basis of how family-planning disclosures were handled, was relegated to meeting direct, unambiguous disclosures from her spouse with ambiguous and uncertain responses in order to create more marital conflict.

In this trajectory, the child-free advocating spouse used ultimatums that stressed remaining child-free was nonnegotiable. One 48-year-old male participant explained his wife's position on family planning and said, "Okay, it's either me and no kids or somebody else, and I would just say 'whatever' and let it go" (25: 71–72). Though using an ultimatum, the child-free advocating spouse left the child-wanting spouse with little room to negotiate family-planning issues, and, again, the child-wanting spouse was left to meet the direct and unambiguous disclosure with an uncertain and ambiguous response. Consequently, child-wanting spouses were relegated to committing to the relationship and responding to child-free disclosures in ambiguous ways that implied commitment to their spouse but not to the child-free decision.

The participants in the bilateral-persuasion trajectory described their family-planning communication with their spouse as highly contentious, negative exchanges. The participants categorized in the bilateral-persuasion trajectory characterized these argumentative conversations as infrequent, but when they occurred, they were extremely intense. In addition, the child-wanting spouse expressed very low levels of satisfaction with the family-planning process. According to one 41-year-old female participant, "I think that it just bothered me that going into it there wasn't a give and take . . . 'it was my way or the highway'" (9: 237–238). The child-wanting spouses from bilateral-persuasion couples argued that their child-free advocating spouses ruled unilaterally on family-planning issues, and that they had little say in their own reproductive decisions.

In sum, from our analysis of these data, we characterized participants as belonging to a bilateral-persuasion couple if the spouses within the couple had opposing family-planning preferences. The message-centered coordination sequences of couples in this trajectory consisted of direct, unambiguous, and often heated disclosures made by the child-free wanting spouse that restricted the other spouse from revisiting family-planning topics. Consequently, participants perceived that the family-planning decision-making power in the bilateral-persuasion couples in the present study rested solely with the child-free wanting spouse.

Discussion

Although each of the four intradyadic family-planning trajectories developed from these present data were distinct, from our findings we suggest that a child-free decision represents a complex and dynamic communication process. Communication Privacy Management theory (Petronio, 2002) was an especially effective theory to allow us to focus on the family-planning interaction of these couples and the development of distinctive pathways to the child-free decision. Scholars have previously focused their research on how social forces influence and potentially stigmatize VCF couples based on their decision to remain

child-free (Morrell, 1993; Park, 2002). While important, these researchers have largely ignored how couples arrive at these decisions intradyadically. In the present study, we have argued that the four family-planning trajectories developed from these present data suggest that a VCF decision represents a complex intradyadic process where spouses, at points during the process, do not always agree on family planning, especially in the cases of unilateral-persuasion and bilateral-persuasion couples.

The four trajectories represent a complex and dynamic model concerning how VCF couples interact and enact family planning. Through our results we respond to the call of communication researchers who argue we should move away from simpler, unitary models of relational development and toward multiple pathway models that reflect the complex and dynamic nature of communication within families (e.g., Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001). Not only did the four trajectories vary greatly; the nature of the communication and the circumstances surrounding the decision to remain child-free varied within each trajectory.

For researchers studying VCF couples, the four developmental trajectories shift the focus of research from external cultural pressures, stigmatizing agents, and incidence of voluntary childlessness to a focus on the dynamic, interactive processes that result in family-planning decisions and the relational development of couples. Through a focus on the interaction of VCF couples, we examined not only the processes that resulted in multiple trajectories of the child-free decision, but the interaction that led to how these various trajectories were enacted.

From our analysis of these data, the couple's perceived balance of power within the dyad represented the most important aspect of boundary coordination for VCF couples. Boundary coordination depended on the degree of perceived agreement and the perception of equitable control over family planning for each couple. Through using Communication Privacy Management (Petronio, 2002) as the theoretical underpinning of the present study, we extended the research on VCF couples by focusing on the communicative management of power within the couple. Petronio (2002) argued that power is enacted based on the roles that communicators have during boundary coordination. In the present study, we found largely incongruent and incompatible message-centered coordination fit in the unilateral-persuasion and bilateral persuasion trajectories. In other words, we found that the issue of interpersonal power usually comes to the fore when one spouse uses unambiguous child-free disclosures with an uncertain or undecided spouse. This finding supports Petronio's (2002) contention that if power differences are inherent within the couple during boundary coordination, these power differences become more recognizable once the spouses use incompatible message-centered coordination fit sequences.

As with any study, there are limitations and opportunities for research. In the present study, we relied on the perspectives of individual spouses, and future researchers will want to seek the perspective of both spouses to compare their perspectives on these interactions. A larger sample study in the logical empirical paradigm will allow researchers to compare couples in the four trajectories and to focus on outcome variables and differences among the trajectory types (e.g., marital satisfaction and long-term effects on the couple and their marriage). We are also aware that some couples who made the child-free decision

may reconsider later and elect to reproduce. Researchers need to study couples who subsequently decided to have children and focus on the interactions leading to that change. In addition, while we have focused on the VCF interaction and decision as internal to the dyad, we recognize that this decision influences and is influenced by the larger social webs in which the couple interacts. The first author has current work in progress to study the role of social network members on the child-free decision.

The four family-planning trajectories presented here represent an important contribution to understanding the experience and interaction of VCF couples because they illustrate the unique pathways these couples take to arrive at their reproductive decisions. Through developing trajectories that reflect the dynamic and complex nature of family planning for voluntarily child-free couples, we focused on the process that these couples enacted prior to reaching their child-free decision, rather than focusing solely on how the voluntarily child-free outcome can create stigma for couples. Consequently, these trajectories illustrate the processes and, often, the difficulties that couples endure when arriving at a voluntarily child-free decision. The four trajectories presented in the present effort have implications for VCF couples, social network members, and family practitioners. The four trajectories illustrate both the ease and difficulty that couples experience throughout the family-planning process. A few of the participants in the present study commented that they and their spouse received counseling based on their disagreements with the decision to remain child-free; however, most did not. Consequently, as the number of couples electing to remain child-free increase, there is a greater need for counselors, clergy, and other family practitioners to understand the complex issues surrounding this family-planning decision and the potential intradyadic and extra dyadic relational strain that a VCF decision may create.

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