THE MEANING AND EXPERIENCE OF STARTING A FAMILY FOR COUPLES

WHO WERE INITIALLY UNDECIDED ABOUT HAVING CHILDREN:

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

by

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B.A., The University of British Columbia, 1993
M.A., Simon Fraser University, 1998

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education)

We accept this thesis as conforming
to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

January 2001

Department of _Educational ; Counselling Psychology, and Special Education_

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

Date _June 7, 2001_

DE-6 (2/88)

ABSTRACT

A qualitative phenomenological research design was used to investigate the experience of parenthood decision-making for couples who were initially uncertain about starting a family. The purpose of the study was to explicate couples' experiences of deciding if, and when, to have children, including how they determine the viability and timing of parenting in their lives and relationships. Eight couples who had recently made the decision to try to have a child volunteered to describe their experiences and understanding of parenthood decision-making in joint, in-depth, audio-taped interviews.

A thematic analysis of the essential meaning structures of participants' parenthood decision-making experiences revealed six common themes: A Sense of the Costs of Parenthood; A Sense of Fear; Changing Perceptions from the Costs to the Gains of Parenthood; An Emerging Sense of Readiness for Parenthood; A Sense of Excitement and Curiosity; and A Sense of Faith in the Relationship. These themes were confirmed and refined through validation interviews with participants. These findings are discussed as they relate to and extend upon models of decision-making, in general, and of parenthood decision-making, in particular. It is argued that the results support a conceptualization of parenthood decision-making as a complex and value-laden phenomenon that is comprised of both individual and interpersonal components.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The decision to become a parent or to remain childless is arguably the most consequential and important decision made over the course of one's lifetime (Bombardieri, 1981; Whelan, 1975). Reproductive choices impart significant and irrevocable psychological and financial consequences (LaRossa, 1983). Advances in contraceptive methods and reproductive technology, coupled with increased societal acceptance of alternative family structures (Miller, 1983), have rendered reproductive intentions and preferences more consequential in parenthood decision-making (McClelland, 1980). Yet there is little current information or research available on the factors that mediate individuals' reproductive decisions, or on how couples reach decisions on the timing or viability of parenting in their lives. Indeed, few models exist for understanding couples' experience of parenthood decision-making and for assisting couples in making personally satisfying reproductive choices.

This study explored the lived experiences of couples who had recently made a decision to try to have a child. More specifically, the purpose of this study was to explicate couples' experiences in deciding if, and when, to have children, and to identify common themes in the experiences of couples who have made this choice. In addition, the study examined how couples make meaning of these critical decision as individuals, and as a couple. It was hoped that the study's results would add to the understanding of how couples determine the viability and timing of parenting in their lives and relationships. As well, it was

hoped that the results might begin to explicate how spouses work through differences in their parenting intentions and desires.

Statement of the Problem

North America has witnessed dramatic changes to fertility rates, birth-timing, and family size and structure over the last four decades (Statistics Canada, 1999). The onset and evolvement of the Industrial Revolution, and the concomitant shift away from an agriculturally-based economy toward an industrial society, has coincided with decreases in fertility rates (Cain, 1983; Hanwerker, cited in Schoen, Kim, Nathanson, Fields, & Astone, 1997). An expanding industrial economy rendered large family sizes disadvantageous, and afforded small families more opportunity for economic prosperity (Weeks, 1989). As well, modern society offered women alternatives to motherhood. The consolidation of women in the workplace, coupled with advances in contraceptive methods, provided women non-maternal alternatives (Lomanna & Riedmann, 1991). Today, men and women have access to an unprecedented breadth of personal, professional, and family planning options.

The staggering array of lifestyle choices with which modern couples are confronted render the experience of resolving individual and interpersonal fertility desires and intentions ever more complex (Thompson, 1997). Traditionally, childbearing was viewed as a natural and expected expression of adult maturity (LeMasters, 1957; Williamson, 1966; Winch, 1971). Family planning efforts thus focused on issues of "when" and "how many" (Lomanna & Reidmann, 1991). Advancements in reproductive medicine and changing sociocultural

conditions have afforded women and men a breadth of family planning alternatives, and have made more consequential reproductive preferences and choice (Daniels & Weingarten, 1980; Miller, 1983). Although it appears that the majority of adults intend on having children, significant variability exists in the family structures they envisage. Modern fertility choices include homosexual-headed families, single parent-headed families, single-child families, and childlessness as viable reproductive options. Today's couples must therefore contend with issues of "if" and "what", as well as "when" and "how many."

This increased range of lifestyle alternatives has coincided with changes in fertility rates and birth-timing among Canadian couples. Canada's fertility rate has dropped steadily over the last four decades (Statistics Canada, 1999). Today's fertility rate is less than half of a peak reached in 1959, when women had an average of 3.9 children. In addition, an increasing proportion of births has been to women aged 30 years or older. One third of first births in 1997 were to women 30 years of age or older. This late birth-timing trend has increased from 1987, when only 19% of first births were to mothers over 30 years. Older mothers also represent an increasing proportion of all live births. In 1997, 44% of all live births in Canada were born to women 30 years of age or older. This record high compares to a lower late birth-timing rate of 31% in 1987. Thus, although women in their 20s still account for the majority of births in Canada, women are choosing to have fewer children, and many are entering motherhood at an older age.

Further constitutive of changes to sociocultural norms has been the increased breadth of opportunities available to women (Nock, 1987). Whereas

motherhood was once considered the hallmark of female development (Morell, 1994), women today have access to a wide expanse of non-maternal pursuits:

> Rather than focusing on their role as the "producer" of children, women must fit childbearing and childrearing into the rest of their lives, including roles viewed potentially "as important" as maternity . . . Maternity will compete with other identities and will be expected to fit with them. (Nock, 1987, p. 391)

Economic, occupational, social, and personal goals influence, and are influenced by, women's parenthood desires and intentions (e.g., Wilk, 1986). Changing gender roles, and the concomitant changes in the distribution of gendered power in relationships, may impact on how couples decide if, and when, to have children.

This discussion suggests that parenthood intentions and decisions are temporally and culturally contextualized. Findings on older cohorts' fertility intentions and actions may not serve as accurate proxies for modern couples' experiences of parenthood decision-making. Furthermore, little is known about how couples actually decide if, and when, to attempt to have children or about the meaning of this decision in their lives and relationships.

Rather, previous efforts to understand parenthood decision-making have been largely restricted to the exploration of the correlates of family planning variables. Much of this research aimed to reveal the individual and interpersonal factors associated with various fertility choices, including fertility intentions and rates, family size, and birth-timing. For example, voluntarily childless couples

have been consistently shown to share more non-traditional, egalitarian marriages than do intended parents or parents (e.g., Hoffman & Levant, 1985; Houseknecht, 1982; Seccombe, 1991). Voluntarily childless individuals are also more likely to be first born or only children (Nason & Paloma, 1976; Veevers, 1980). In contrast, those intent on becoming parents or parents are likely to have extended family support systems (Jacobson & Heaton, 1990), and typically have more traditional gender role structures (Hoffman & Levant; Neal, Groat, & Wicks, 1989).

Researchers have typically drawn on rational decision-making models (e.g., Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) to explicate these and other results on the factors associated with various reproductive choices. These models assume a rational view of parenthood decision-making. That is, individuals are presumed to make reproductive decisions under conditions of certainty and with access to all available alternatives (McGrew & Wilson, 1982). Jabes (1978) offers the following definition of rational decision-making: ". . . goal-directed behavior by the individual, in response to a certain need, with the intention of satisfying the motive that the need occasions" (p. 53). Although this conceptualization may appropriately apply to some instances of decision-making behavior, the complexities of parenthood decision-making may not be sufficiently addressed by this definition.

Indeed, individuals' and couples' experience of negotiating family planning options represents a unique instance of decision-making for at least three reasons. First, the process by which couples decide when, and if, to have children

does not appear to be entirely rational (Miller, 1983). Rather, parenthood decision-making is heavily fraught with emotion, and may not well conform to a rational evaluation of potential reproductive outcomes. Second, reproductive decision-making involves the interaction of spouses' fertility intentions and behaviors (Miller & Pasta, 1996). Thus, the dynamic interchange of influence between partners, and the joint consideration of family planning options, becomes a critical unit of analysis. Third, reproductive decision-making represents a wide variability in the "intentionality" with which individuals and couples act (e.g., Feldman, 1981). Many couples "plan not to plan" (Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Kiesler & Silka, 1977). Therefore, rational decision-making models may not sufficiently address, or account for, the complexities and peculiarities of parenthood decision-making behavior. In brief, it appears that couples' experience of deciding on whether to parent or to remain childless is highly complex, and may not be well conceptualized by rational models of decision-making. Rather, parenthood decision-making may be better conceptualized as a phenomenon occurring under conditions of uncertainty and bounded rationality (Jabes, 1978).

In summary, changes in the nature of couples' fertility choices suggest that parenthood decision-making is significantly influenced by changing cultural and temporal contexts. Modern couples are increasingly opting for smaller families and are starting their families at an older age. In addition, an increasing minority of couples are remaining childless by choice (e.g., Houseknetch, 1987; Veevers, 1980). In an effort to illuminate these changes to parenthood decision-making

behavior and fertility outcomes, the extant research has focused on identifying correlates and determinants of fertility intentions and behaviors. Most of this research is heavily steeped in rational decision-making theory, and has not well explicated how couples construct and experience parenthood decisions in their lives. The research that has examined individuals' and couples' experience of parenthood decision-making has failed to reveal the meaning with which individuals endow various reproductive alternatives and, concomitantly, how couples decide on the viability and timing of parenthood in their lives.

Purpose of the Study

The time is thus ripe to explore how couples today experience and make meaning of the decision of if, and when, to have children, including how they integrate their personal, relational, and professional values and goals into their parenthood intentions and behaviors. The present study used a phenomenological approach in an attempt to answer the question: **"What is the meaning and experience of deciding to start a family for couples who were initially uncertain about having children?"** A qualitative approach is ideally suited to the study of ill-understood phenomena, as it allows for the exploration and discovery of individuals' lived experiences and the meaning structures with which they endow those experiences (Colaizzi, 1978; Osborne, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1989). In this study, an in-depth unstructured interview protocol was used to explicate how couples understand and experience parenthood decision-making. Data was analyzed to identify common themes in the couples' experiences of deciding if, and when, to have children (Osborne, 1990).

The goal of the present research was to inform a better understanding of how couples experience and make sense of the decision to start a family. It was hoped that this research would begin to explicate, and inform clinical practice on how couples construct and resolve childbearing plans. More specifically, this study aimed to augment previous research on parenthood decision-making by investigating the intrapersonal and interpersonal processes by which couples resolve ambivalent childbearing desires and intentions, and concomitantly, by which they arrive at the decision to try to have a child. As no study to date has examined the phenomenon of parenthood decision-making from the perspective of couples who were originally unsure of their commitment to have a child, this study offers important, clinically relevant insights into couples' experiences of deciding both if, and when, to attempt to start a family.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

In the discussion to follow, I review the conceptual and empirical literature on parenthood decision-making. First, decision theory (e.g., Nye, 1979; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) is reviewed and critiqued as it relates to fertility intentions and behaviors. I argue that decision theory extends knowledge about the factors that predict fertility intentions and outcome, but that it insufficiently informs our understanding of how those factors impact on, and mediate, the process of parenthood decision-making. More specifically, I contend that decision theory represents a deterministic approach to understanding reproductive choice, as it discounts the complexity of parenthood decision-making and the meanings with which individuals and couples endow the experience of deciding to have children. Next, several extant models of reproductive choice are reviewed. These models represent formative conceptualizations of reproductive decision-making, and suggest directions for future research and theory building. Theoretical gaps and methodological insufficiencies are identified and discussed as they provide a rationale for a more comprehensive and clinically applicable approach to researching and conceptualizing parenthood decision-making. This approach draws on phenomenological research to uncover the experiences of couples who have recently decided to try to have children.

Decision Theory

Although the experience of parenthood decision-making remains ill-understood, a large body of research has examined family planning variables as they predict fertility behavior. More specifically, several studies have examined expected and desired family size, fertility rates, and birth intervals (e.g., Westoff & Ryder, 1977; Whelpton, Campbell, & Patterson, 1966). These studies rely on aggregate data, and endorse socioeconomic, educational, and professional determinants of reproductive behavior. Concepts from decision theory are typically used to generate research questions and to conceptualize study results. Social exchange theory and reasoned action theory are two models which have been particularly useful in explicating the relationship between family planning variables, and fertility intentions and outcomes.

Social Exchange Theory. Social exchange theory (Emerson, 1976, 1981) has received considerable attention from family planning researchers, and constitutes the pre-eminent model for predicting and explaining individuals' fertility behaviors. Social exchange theory postulates that people are rational and that behavior is purposeful (Emerson). Specifically, social behavior is conceptualized to reflect the evaluation of the actual or perceived costs and benefits of one action over another (Nye, 1979; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). The "comparison level" (Emerson; Thibaut & Kelley) describes the comparative evaluation in which individuals engage in assessing the attractiveness of various action alternatives, compared to a minimal expected threshold of what the reward-cost outcome of each of these alternatives should be. Within this framework, a

decision is theorized to reflect a person's perception that the rewards-cost outcome of one social behavior is greater than that of another.

Conceptualized from a social exchange perspective, parenthood decision-making is a process constitutive of a series of consecutive evaluations—and concomitant choices—reflecting the desirability of parenthood options over other life choices. Individuals' parenthood intentions reflect a weighing of the disadvantages of childbearing against the perceived rewards of parenthood. This comparative assessment is subjective: economic and social constraints will be viewed differently, depending on individuals' goals and values (Bagozzi & Van Loo, 1980).

Research on the perceived costs and benefits of parenthood reveals reproductive decision-making to be an intricate and variable phenomenon (Thomson, 1997). Although social exchange theory offers a framework to predict economic, social, and societal factors that mediate individuals' evaluative comparisons of reproductive choices, this theory insufficiently accounts for the role of values, beliefs, and personal and shared meanings as they influence individuals' and couples' experiences of reproductive decision-making.

Indeed, findings on the perceived costs of parenthood are inconsistent, and endorse an emphasis on the subjective experience of the costs and benefits of parenthood relative to other options. Economic costs, for example, have been examined as mediators of reproductive desires and intentions. Weeks (1989) suggests that declines in fertility rates over previous decades reflect the enhanced economic opportunities available to small families. Indeed, many researchers

have documented a negative relation between number of children and educational/occupational achievement and income levels (e.g., Hewlett, 1986; Rindfuss, Bumpass, & St. John; Sweet; White & Kim, cited in Seccombe, 1991). Opportunity costs—that is, the educational, occupational, and economic advancement that one foregoes to have children—may be a significant deterrent against having children for professional women. Professional wives may be less willing than more traditional women, to compromise the rewards of a satisfying career to have children. Moreover, these women may perceive their professional roles to be fulfilling alternatives to motherhood (Espenshade, 1977; Seccombe). Other researchers have found women's educational status and occupational satisfaction to be positively associated with childbearing intentions (Thomson, 1997; White & Kim, 1987). Perhaps professional women enjoy more egalitarian marriages, wherein the anticipation of an equitable division of parenting and household labor augments the perceived benefits of parenthood. However, social exchange theory does not sufficiently address and explicate why such evaluative discrepancies exist in comparable populations and cohorts.

Research on the relationship between economic factors and men's parenthood plans generally reveals a correlation between income and fertility intentions opposite of that documented for women. That is, intended fathers and fathers have a higher income than childless men (US Bureau of the Census, cited in Nock, 1987). These apparently disparate findings on the relation between perceived economic costs, and men's and women's reproductive intentions,

suggest comparative evaluations of reproductive options are complex and subjective, and may vary as a function of sex and socioeconomic status.

Social exchange theorists have similarly proposed marital dissatisfaction to be a cost of parenthood, citing moderate correlations between marital dissatisfaction and parenthood at various parities (e.g., Glen & McLanahan, 1982; Houseknetcht, 1987). In particular, some researchers have found marital satisfaction to be highest before childbearing and after adult children leave home (Nock, 1979; Spanier, Lewis, & Cole, 1975). Although changes to marital satisfaction may influence childbearing intentions at parities of one or more, it is unlikely that childless couples anticipate the impact that parenthood appears to impart on the marital dyad (Nock, 1987). Thus, marital dissatisfaction may not be considered in initial comparative evaluations of the costs and rewards of parenthood over other lifestyle choices.

While economic and relationship factors may influence comparative evaluations of the relative costs and benefits of childbearing options, societal sanctions against childlessness, and the personal meanings individuals bring to parenthood, may most significantly inform fertility decision-making. Importantly, these factors have received scant regard in decision theory literature, rendering postulations on the association between sociocultural norms, personal meanings, and reproductive intentions speculative.

Despite a marked increase in childless rates in recent years, childlessness remains an ill-understood and highly stigmatized phenomenon. Voluntarily childless individuals are viewed by many as selfish, maladjusted, unhappy,

hedonistic, irresponsible, and immature (Adams, DeVilla & DeVilla, 1984;
Callan, 1983a, 1983b, 1983, 1987; Kahan & Ross, 1983; Peterson, 1983).
Implicit in these judgements is a strong pronatalist bias that espouses parenthood
to be an ideal and expected life goal. Deviations from the social imperative of
parenthood may be subject to social ostracism and negative stereotyping. These
sanctions may constitute a significant cost of childlessness, while conforming to
pronatalist bias may represent an important benefit of parenthood (Seccombe,
1991).

Gender role values may furthermore mediate the relative saliency of
societal sanctions against childlessness, in influencing individuals' comparative
evaluations of alternatives (Nock, 1987). Women adhering to traditional gender
role values may, for example, cast a favorable light upon motherhood, perceiving
few costs to be associated with parenthood as compared to childlessness.
Nontraditional women, on the other hand, may find rewards in alternative, non-
maternal life roles, and may endow motherhood with significant disadvantage
(Nock). In summary, individuals experience parenthood and childlessness in
personally meaningful ways. Social exchange theory highlights the importance of
subjective evaluations of the relative costs and benefits associated with various
reproductive options, and the association between these evaluations and fertility
intentions. From this theoretical perspective, individuals are viewed as rational
beings who systematically compare family planning alternatives, and who
influence and are influenced by the flow of exchange that occurs in dyadic
relationships (Bagozzi & Van Loo, 1980).

Although social exchange theory has advanced our understanding of the economic and social factors that individuals may consider in evaluating parenthood options over a childfree status, several methodological and theoretical insufficiencies limit the clinical applicability of this theory. First, social exchange theory's postulation that individuals act rationally may not well capture the highly personal and emotional process in which individuals engage in deciding if, and when, to have children. That is, decision theory posits an optimal performance wherein individuals systemically evaluate the relative costs and benefits of fertility options. Jabes (1978), however, challenges the concept of rational decision-making, and rather suggests that individuals operate under a "bounded rationality" that limits the goals and alternatives to which they have access. This view coheres well with research on the fertility behaviors of low income, minority women. These women typically have more children than they had intended (Ryder & Westoff, 1971), perhaps owing to limited access to education on, and availability of, effective contraceptive methods. This perspective also highlights the import of the individual's subjective experience of the fertility options with which she or he is confronted, and the concomitant unique meanings which she or he brings to that experience: "Decision making is a complex process, unique for each individual in accordance with his [or her] perceptual, motivational, and value makeup" (Jabes, p. 59).

A related limitation of social exchange theory concerns its insufficiency in accounting for the uncertainty under which fertility intentions are formulated and implemented (McClelland, 1980; McGrew & Wilson, 1982). That is, individuals'

and couples' fertility intentions more likely reflect their tentative perceptions of the consequences that are likely to ensue if one alternative is chosen over another, as opposed to an informed and rational weighing of fertility alternatives. Parenthood decision-making may thus not conform to such a rational model of choice.

Social exchange theory furthermore fails to incorporate adequately the dyadic relationship between partners as it bears on the negotiation of fertility intentions and behavior. Relationships are viewed as venues for the exchange of social influence (Bagozzi & Van Loo, 1980). Joint satisfaction represents the outcome of the transfer of mutual influence (for instance, rewards and punishment). This perspective assumes a kind of quid pro quo approach to joint decision making that may not well explicate the process by which couples interact as they jointly construct parenthood or childlessness in their lives.

Social exchange does not, for example, adequately address the process by which couples negotiate highly disparate fertility intentions. Nor does social exchange theory sufficiently elucidate the role of gender imperatives, familial influences, and so on, in influencing the relative power that partners have in resolving such discrepancies. Thomson (1990), in postulating on the processes by which couples negotiate disagreements, suggests that couples may draw on the patriarchal or sphere of influence rule to resolve discrepant intentions. Under the patriarchal rule, wives typically concede to their husbands' desires and intentions. Under the sphere of influence rule, wives would have more influence owing to the culturally proscribed association between womanhood and motherhood. Couples

may also draw on other strategies to resolve discrepant fertility intentions. Social exchange theory falls short in merely identifying the factors that individuals consider in evaluating and negotiating various reproductive alternatives. It does not sufficiently reveal couples' experiences of deciding if, and when, to have children, nor does it explain why differences exist in the factors that couples consider in evaluating the value of various reproductive options.

Indeed, a fourth shortcoming of social exchange theory is its failure to explain the very phenomena it describes. Social exchange theory's pre-eminence in fertility research has restricted understanding of parenthood decision-making to "because of" explanations, that reduce reproductive choice to sociocultural and socioeconomic determinants. These studies address questions of "what" (for example, "What socioeconomic factors predict family size?"), as opposed to "why" or "how". More specifically, despite an extensive history in family studies, social exchange theory appears to have contributed relatively little to the understanding of the experience of parenthood decision-making. To this end, Fishbein, Jaccard, Davidson, Ajzen, and Loken (1980) note that fertility research has inadequately addressed why certain social, economic, or relational factors predict particular fertility intentions and behaviors. Discrepancies in studies' results—for example, inconsistencies in the relation between income and educational status, and fertility intentions (White & Kim, 1987)—may well reflect the inadequacy of social exchange theory in revealing individuals' experiences of fertility alternatives.

In short, social exchange theory's application to parenthood decision-making is seemingly limited. Although this theory has contributed a framework from which to conceptualize individuals' and couples' evaluations of fertility alternatives, it does not suffice in explaining the complex, individual and shared experiences in which couples engage in exploring the meaning, viability, and timing of parenthood in their lives.

Theory of Reasoned Action. The theory of reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) shares several assumptions with social exchange theory, and has been applied to research on the relation between individuals' fertility intentions and behaviors and fertility outcomes in the presence of couple's disagreement. The theory of reasoned action posits that individuals systemically integrate their own and other's attitudes to generate a rational decision. Individuals are assumed to act under their own volition, and to evaluate rationally the consequences of various behavioral alternatives before making a decision.

More specifically, the theory of reasoned action postulates that individuals will act in accordance with their intentions (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Intentions are conceptualized as a function of individuals' attitudes toward, and subjective norms about, the behavior in question. Attitudes and subjective norms are, in turn, predicted by individuals' beliefs that the behavior will lead to particular outcomes and that it will be evaluated positively by others. This theory extends on social exchange theory in incorporating referent norms and attitudes into individuals' decision-making experiences. The theory of reasoned action furthermore accounts for the relative significance of individuals' own attitudes

toward, and evaluation of, behavioral alternatives as compared to social referents and prescriptions. Debate nevertheless exists as to the applicability and utility of the theory of reasoned action in more fully explaining fertility intentions and behaviors.

Miller and Pasta (1996), for example, applied reasoned action theory to the results of their study on the effects of couple disagreement on the formation and implementation of fertility decisions. In this longitudinal study, they interviewed 401 couples—201 couples with no children and 200 couples with one child—over the course of a three year period. Specifically, couples were administered structured interviews separately, at the time of the initial contact, and at 1 year, 2 years, and 3-1/2 years thereafter. Interview questions concerned couples' fertility desires and intentions, for example, the certainty of spouses' childbearing intentions, and the timing and number of children they desired. In addition, participants were questioned about proceptive behavior, that is, any active steps they were taking to achieve a first or subsequent pregnancy.

For couples who initially had no children, disagreement over fertility intentions imparted a pronatalist effect such that conflicted couples achieved a birth sooner than did non-conflicted couples. Conflicted couples with one child delayed a second pregnancy longer than did non-conflicted couples. In addition, an interaction effect between sex and parity was found such that women at a parity of zero were less responsive to their spouses' earlier child-timing desires than were childless men. In contrast, women with one child were more responsive to their husbands' earlier child-timing desires than were their male

counterparts in responding to their wife's later child-timing desires. Miller and Pasta discussed the utility of reasoned action theory as a framework from which to address couples' joint fertility decision-making.

Specifically, in accordance with reasoned action theory, Miller and Pasta (1996) noted that individuals' fertility intentions and behaviors are influenced by the subjective norms to which they are exposed—most significantly, spousal fertility intentions—and by their willingness to comply with those norms. Miller and Pasta further observed, however, that the theory falls short in accounting for differing strengths of willingness to comply. Indeed, they suggest that a better understanding of how couples negotiate disparate fertility intentions demands comprehension of the individual and interpersonal factors that influence spouses' motivations to consider and reconcile their partners' parenthood goals with their own.

Furthermore, reasoned action theory insufficiently illuminates the complexities of fertility behavior. Most problematic is the theory's failure to account for discrepancies between individuals' reproductive intentions and the actual reproductive behavior in which they engage. The theory's premise that individuals typically act in accordance with their intentions may be an overly simplistic portrayal of parenthood decision-making.

Bumpass and Westoff (1969) conducted a large scale, longitudinal study of women's fertility intentions and completed family size. Specifically, women were interviewed six months after the birth of their second child, and then again six to ten years later. A moderate correlation was found between women's

childbearing intentions and actual family size (r=.56), suggesting that fertility

intentions may not accurately predict actual reproductive outcomes. Reasoned

action theory also insufficiently accounts for the well-documented variability in

the "intentionality" with which couples act (e.g,. Feldman, 1981; Kiesler & Silka,

1977). That is, many couples plan not to plan. These couples typically harbor

ambivalent reproductive intentions, and adhere to an "acceptance of fate"

mentality (Cowan & Cowan, 1992) that does not well cohere with the linear

model of reproductive outcome posited by reasoned action theory. Indeed,

several factors may impede the realization of fertility intentions including

ambivalence, infertility, conflicted spousal intentions, ineffective use of

contraception, and so on (Fishbein et al., 1980). Normative models that seek to

describe a uniform experience of decision-making may not sensibly apply to the

complexities of parenthood decision-making. Reasoned action theory does not

address incongruities in reproductive intentions and outcomes, nor does this

theory explicate differences in the planfulness under which couples act.

Parenthood Decision-making Models

The bias in previous research toward identifying correlates of family

planning variables, combined with the aforementioned limitations of decision

theory, have motivated researchers to consider new approaches to researching and

conceptualizing parenthood decision-making. The research that has been

conducted on how couples decide if, and when, to have children has revealed

parenthood decision-making to be a complex phenomenon embedded in familial,

marital, cultural, and temporal contexts. Despite methodological and theoretical

insufficiencies, these efforts have been important in informing a formative

conceptual base from which to understand the parenthood decision-making

process, and in suggesting directions for future research.

    Soloway and Smith's Model of Late Birthtiming Decisions. Soloway and

Smith (1987), for example, offer a model of late birthtiming in dual-career

couples. Specifically, Soloway and Smith interviewed 15 couples on those

factors that influenced their parenthood decision-making. Participants were

recent parents, where both partners were thirty years of age or older, and who had

been pursuing a professional career for 5 to 15 years. Unstructured interviews

were used to solicit couples' perspectives on the factors that they believed had

influenced their decision to postpone parenthood. Modified analytic induction of

the interview data revealed four "Where am I?" issues (occupational identity,

financial security, educational status, and marital commitment) and one "Who am

I?" issue (sex-role identity) that influenced couples' decisions to delay

childbearing. These issues reflected strong family injunctions against early-timed

parenthood. For the majority of couples, the biological time clock was a

motivating factor that led to a reassessment of family injunctions. The authors

posit that women's time-limited capacity to bear children forces couples to

confront inhibiting issues, and to reassess their professional, financial, marital,

and personal goals vis-à-vis parenthood. In this study, the reassessment of family

messages included the incorporation and realization of injunctions to have

children at a later age. While this model advances understanding of the factors

that mediate couples' reproductive decision-making—in particular, in revealing

commonalities in professional men's and women's experience of parenthood decision-making—cohort effects may decrease the relevance of the study's findings to modern couples' experiences of parenthood planning.

Daniels and Weingarten's Model of the Timing of Parenthood in Adult Lives. Daniels and Weingarten's (1982) model of family-timing decisions may be similarly limited in its application to modern couples' experiences of parenthood decision-making. In this dated study, 86 couples participated in joint unstructured interviews, wherein spouses were asked about how they decided on the timing of their first birth, the intrapersonal and interpersonal impact thereof, and the advantages and disadvantages of parenthood. Consistent with 1976 fertility statistics, of the 86 couples interviewed, 36 couples were described as "early-timers", that is, they had had their first child when the wife was 22 years of age or younger. Another 36 couples in the study were "late-timers", or had not achieved a first birth until the wife was 28 years of age or older. A final 14 couples were categorized as "mid-life timers." These couples did not become parents until the wife was at least 37 years old. In an attempt to observe the influence of differing cultural and temporal contexts on couples' experiences of parenthood decision-making, the authors interviewed couples representing three age cohorts approximately ten years apart:

> Our three mini generations accumulated their years from birth each in a
>
> different sweep of historical time. They came of age in different eras.
>
> Whether they became parents early or late, the event bears the stamp
>
> of the values and expectations of their era. (p. 308)

Thus, one third of the mothers in the sample were in their early to mid-30s; one third of the mothers were in their early to mid-40s; and a final third were in their early to mid-50s at the time of the interview. Interview data were analyzed for shared experiences and common themes among couples' accounts of parenthood decision-making. Four parenthood-timing scenarios emerged, each describing the decision-making experiences of a proportion of the total sample.

More specifically, 29% of early-timers and 11% of late-timers described a "preconscious sense of readiness" (Daniels & Weingarten, 1982, p. 16) about having children. This "natural ideal" pattern of parenthood decision-making was most common among Catholic couples, and involved strict injunctions against the use of contraception. Natural ideal couples were represented across all three age cohorts, and viewed parenthood as the appropriate evolution of marriage. A further 18% of early-timing couples and 11% of late-timers opted for a "brief wait" deferment of parenthood. This scenario, present across all three age cohorts, was most common among middle-class, college educated couples. These couples consciously choose to delay parenthood for a short period of time— usually two to three years after marriage—such that they could devote their energies to career goals, financial aspirations, and their new marriages. A third parenthood-timing pattern, "programmatic postponement", was described by a prolonged and calculated period of parenthood planning and negotiations. Programmatic couples articulated several reasons for delaying parenthood in their lives, including a commitment to personal growth and psychological readiness; a desire to strengthen and solidify the marital relationship; and a strong career

orientation. This pattern, not evident among any early-timing couples, described the parenthood decision-making experiences of 19% of late-timing couples. A final 1% of early-timers and 7% of late-timers experienced a "mixed script" decision-making scenario, whereby spouses harbored discrepant child-timing intentions. In these couples, disagreement over the viability and timing of parenthood in their lives caused considerable conflict and marital distress.

Daniels and Weingarten's (1982) study represents an important development in parenthood decision-making research. Their findings offer a formative understanding of the experiences of couples as they make child-timing decisions. Their typology of family-timing scenarios furthermore advances our understanding of the commonalities in couples' decision-making experiences. A possible limitation of this research is the fact that couples were interviewed after having had at least one child. The experience of having children, and the lengthy period that had passed since couples had made the decision to start a family, may have influenced couples' recollections of their experiences in deciding if, and when, to have children. Most problematic for the purpose of the proposed study, however, is the significant time period that has lapsed since this study was conducted.

Indeed, most research on parenthood decision-making is dated, having been conducted in the 1980s. Couples may bring different understandings and expectations to relationships today, which may render comparisons with older cohorts less relevant. For example, currently many couples hold dual careers (Teachman, Polonko, & Scanzoni, 1987), and thus face an unprecedented host of

issues in negotiating career, marital, and familial goals (Wilk, 1986). Illustrative

of the complexity of the parenthood decision-making process is the recent

increase in voluntary childlessness (Jacobson & Heaton, 1991; Neave-Herz,

1989) and late birthtiming (Baldwin & Nord, 1984; Statistics Canada, 1999).

Research on voluntary childlessness suggests that the majority of childless

couples arrive at a "decision" to remain childfree through a series of deliberate

postponements of parenthood (e.g., Ireland, 1993; Veevers, 1980). Career

aspirations, adherence to nonconformist gender roles, or a strong relationship

focus may delay family planning and childbearing, or may support a childfree

choice (Ireland; Morrel, 1994). Thus, the process of negotiating career, family,

and lifestyle choices varies as sociocultural contexts evolve (Cowan & Cowan,

1992).

Cowan and Cowan's Model of Parenthood Decisions. Cowan and Cowan

(1992) more recently posited a typology of childbearing decision-making among

married couples. This typology emerged out of a longitudinal study of 96

couples, aimed at explicating couples' experiences of the transition to parenthood

from a childfree state. Specifically, the researchers followed 72 expectant couples

and 24 non-parents over the course of a ten year period. Couples participated in

joint unstructured interviews at various intervals and points in time, depending on

the nature of their involvement in the study. Of relevance to the proposed

research are the interview data gathered on expectant and non-parents, prior to

their first births. Although the majority of couples had shifted in their positions on

the viability and timing of parenthood in their lives, four patterns of parenthood

decision-making emerged which remained consistent among and between couples. These patterns cohere closely with the typology of child-timing decisions posited by Daniels and Weingarten (1982).

In particular, a minority (14%) of expectant couples adhered to an "acceptance-of-fate" mentality. These couples planned not to plan, and viewed parenthood as a natural and enriching aspect of married life. A further 52% of both expectant and non-parents in the study represented a more planful approach to parenthood decision-making. Although these "planners" easily articulated their reasons for wanting children—namely, the desire for an intimate relationship with a child; the sense of personal maturation accompanying parenthood; and the peer support and friendship of other parents—these couples also prioritized career and financial advancement goals. Planners moreover enjoyed a high degree of marital satisfaction, as measured by the Locke Wallace Brief Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959). High marital satisfaction was also present among a large majority of acceptance-of-fate couples. A third pattern of decision-making, "ambivalence", described the family planning experiences of 20% of expectant couples and 44% of non-parents. Among ambivalent couples, one or both partners expressed mixed feelings about having children. Many ambivalent couples held discrepant childbearing desires and intentions, possibly contributing to the higher levels of marital dissatisfaction experienced by this group as compared to acceptance-of-fate couples or planners. A final 13% of expectant couples experienced intense and unresolved conflict over incompatible childbearing plans. A majority of these "Yes/No" couples described unhappy and

otherwise negative childhood experiences in their own families-of-origin. While these experiences seemed to underlie some spouses' desires for their own children, others rejected parenthood for fear of repeating destructive familial patterns.

In an attempt to assess the role of problem-solving skills in mediating the nature of couples' parenthood planning intentions and behaviors, Cowan and Cowan (1992) asked expectant and non-parents to describe, on separate questionnaires, a recent disagreement that they had had that was unrelated to parenthood decision-making. Specifically, each spouse was asked to describe the nature of the disagreement, as well as the manner in which the disagreement was resolved and respondents' satisfaction with the outcome. Independent raters reviewed couples' respective accounts, and generated an overall measure of problem-solving effectiveness. Interestingly, Yes/No couples had the most difficulty resolving their disagreements. Planners, on the other hand, appeared to be most effective at joint problem-solving. On the basis on these findings, Cowan and Cowan concluded that spouses' ability—or lack thereof—in arriving at mutually satisfying childbearing decisions reflects the relative competence and efficacy of couples' problem-solving skills in general.

Cowan and Cowan's (1992) research on couples' experiences in making the transition to parenthood is impressive on several accounts. First, the longitudinal nature of this research has informed a better understanding of how couples' orientations to, and intentions about, parenthood evolve over the course of time. As well, this research offers a formative understanding of how different

styles of parenthood decision-making may influence and be influenced by relative levels of marital satisfaction and couples' problem-solving competencies. Finally, couples recruited for this study represented a wider range of sociodemographic characteristics than is evident in most fertility research. The fact that the findings of this study cohere closely to the results of other research on family planning patterns (Daniels & Weingarten, 1982) suggests that couples may indeed adhere to discrete "styles" of decision-making behavior, regardless of their socioeconomic, racial, or occupational status. The present research may advance on Cowan and Cowan's study in describing the decision-making experiences of couples who have moved from an original stance of ambivalence regarding the decision to have children, to actively attempting to start a family. In addition to describing the decision-making experiences of these couples, the present study illuminates the individual and interpersonal meanings endowed in these experiences, and, concomitantly, in the anticipation of parenthood.

Miller and Pasta's Model of Fertility Sequence. Miller and Pasta (1996) offer a theoretical framework from which to conceptualize the relation between childbearing motivations, desires, intentions, and behaviors. This framework incorporates and synthesizes a variety of constructs posited by different theories of fertility decision-making (e.g., Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Bagozzi & Van Loo, 1980; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Beckman, Aizenberg, Forsythe, & Day, 1983), namely, attitudes, values, norms, desires, intentions, and expectancies related to parenthood planning. Specifically, Miller and Pasta postulate that psychological traits—for example, childbearing motivations and child-timing attitudes—are

integrated into reproductive desires. These desires include childbearing desires, child-number desires, and child-timing desires. Reproductive desires, in turn, predict childbearing intentions. The latter are conceptualized as conscious commitments to realize particular childbearing goals. In the final phase of the model, reproductive intentions are posited to generate reproductive behavior. This model is impressive in its integration of couples' interaction at each stage of the decision-making sequence. More specifically, Miller and Pasta contend that couples influence the formation of one another's reproductive motivations through daily exchanges and the sharing of life experiences. Furthermore, individuals' reproductive intentions are believed to reflect the integration of perceptions of their partners' desires into their own. Finally, proceptive behavior necessitates the joint implementation of fertility intentions.

Miller and Pasta's (1996) model advances on previous parenthood decision-making theories in accounting for the role of the marital dyad as a referent for the formulation of childbearing motivations, desires, and intentions. Problematic, however, is the authors' failure to adequately explain and operationalize components of the model. For instance, the authors conceptualize psychological traits as being synonymous with "childbearing motivations, attitudes, and beliefs" (Miller & Pasta, 1996, p. 308). The authors further contend that latent traits are "activated" and "integrated" into childbearing desires. No further explanation of these concepts is offered, for example, how psychological traits develop or when and why these traits are activated. A second shortcoming

of Miller and Pasta's model concerns the relation between childbearing desires, intentions, and actions.

More specifically, as noted previously in this chapter, fertility desires and intentions may not accurately predict childbearing behavior. In the aforementioned study on the effects of discrepant childbearing intentions on the formulation and implementation of proceptive behavior, 401 childless or parity-one couples (Miller & Pasta, 1996) were interviewed four times over a three year period regarding their respective fertility intentions and proceptive behaviors. Couples who planned to have children very soon tended to procept later than they had intended. Similarly, couples who planned to procept later tended to have a child sooner than they had intended. Perhaps factors other than reproductive desires and intentions influence the actual fertility behavior in which couples engage. A final insufficiency of Miller and Pasta's model is that, while describing some of the factors that predict fertility outcomes and the relation between those factors, the model does not explain how desires and intentions develop, nor why differences exist between spouses' intentions and couples' reproductive behavior.

Beckman, Aizenberg, Forsythe, and Day's Social-Psychological Model of Fertility. In an attempt to advance previous research pursuits on the determinants of fertility behavior (e.g., Davidson & Jaccard, 1975; Fishbein, 1967, 1972), Beckman and her colleagues (1983) developed and tested a social-psychological model of fertility intentions and outcomes. Specifically, this model examines the effect of sociodemographic influences on fertility attitudes and parenthood

motivation, and, concomitantly, on fertility outcomes. In addition, the researchers were interested in explicating the nature and influence of couples' interactions on fertility behaviors. Based on this theoretically derived model, it was hypothesized that sociodemographic factors would affect fertility intentions and outcomes only indirectly through their effects on couples' attitudes toward, and motivation for, parenthood. Beckman et al. further speculated that couple interaction factors, such as gendered power and the quality of communication, directly influence fertility intentions and outcomes.

To test their model, Beckman et al. (1983) administered two interviews and several paper and pencil tests to 578 couples who had recently been married or who had recently had a first child. More precisely, participants were married couples, where the wife was aged 18 to 34. The majority of couples were recruited from a random sampling of birth and marriage records. In addition, a small minority of participants was recruited through a snowball procedure. Spouses separately participated in two semi-structured interviews. The first interviews were conducted six months following the date of marriage or first birth. The second interviews were conducted approximately 18 to 20 months thereafter. Following each interview, spouses separately completed a host of pencil and paper tests, including, for example, measures of socioeconomic status, sex-role traditionalism, parenthood motivation, gendered power and spousal communication, joint decision-making, and the consistency of contraceptive use. The LISREL program (Joreskog & Sorbom, 1978) was used to generate two models—one for childless couples and one the new parents, respectively—on the

structural relation between exogenous and endogenous variables in predicting fertility outcomes.

Of particular pertinence to the present research were the findings on the effects of couple interaction variables on spouses' childbearing intentions. For both recently married couples and new parents, spousal childbearing attitudes imparted reciprocal influences. Interestingly, however, the direction of the influence varied depending on couples' stage in their parenthood careers. Among married couples, husbands' sex-role traditionalism and childbearing motivation significantly influenced wives' traditionalism and motivation. In contrast, among new parents, wives' sex-role orientation and childbearing motivation exerted a significant influence on husbands' attitudes toward sex roles and parenthood. Also interesting are the findings that the consistency of contraceptive use was directly influenced by wives' childbearing intentions, and was unaffected by husbands' intentions or motivations. The relative distribution of gendered power was not found to significantly influence wives' or husbands' intentions or motivations, nor was communication found to be a significant factor. Furthermore, in contrast to the researchers' speculations, demographic factors, such as age, ethnicity, and religion, were found to have a direct effect on childbearing intentions and outcomes. The authors conclude that the complexities of couple interaction factors may not be easily captured or explicated by operational definitions used in their study. Beckman and her colleagues (1983) further conclude that, whereas spouse's childbearing attitudes seem to exert reciprocal influences, women both jointly and individually construct

their fertility behaviors through their choice of contraceptive use and by enacting their own childbearing desires.

This study advances our understanding of the relative contribution and impact of spouse's parenthood intentions and motivations on one another's fertility attitudes. In particular, the results suggest that parenthood decision-making is both an intrapersonal and interpersonal experience. A major shortcoming of this research, however, is the use of poorly defined and operationalized measures. In addition, the method of data analysis employed in this study assumes linearity of relationships. This assumption may not accurately describe or explicate the seemingly reciprocal effect of spouse's childbearing attitudes.

Thomson's Analysis of Couple Childbearing Desires, Intentions, and Births. Thomson (1997) examined the fertility-inhibiting and –enhancing effects of concordant and discrepant parenthood desires on spouses' parenthood intentions and births. Respondents were married individuals, randomly selected from a probability sample of households that had been recruited for a national survey of childbearing desires and intentions, and subsequent births and adoptions (National Survey of Families & Households 1, 1987-1988; National Survey of Families & Households 2, 1992-1994). Couples wherein the wife was aged 41 years or older, or wherein children were present from previous marriages, were excluded from the study. Cohabiting couples were likewise ineligible to participate in the study. Of 1143 couples who participated at $NSFH_1$, 87% were represented at $NSFH_2$ by the wife, husband, or both. At $NSFH_1$, primary

respondents participated in a structured interview, as well as supplementary self-report questionnaires. Partners of primary respondents responded to a subset of interview questions in a self-report questionnaire. In this first survey, spouses were asked about their childbearing desires, intentions, and gendered roles and attitudes. Information on demographic variables, such as child parity and religious affiliations, was also gathered at this time. At $NSFH_2$, respondents were asked about any pregnancies, adoptions, or births that had occurred in the five year interval since the first survey.

Interview and questionnaire data were subject to two regression analyses. The first model tested the influence of spouse's desires on one another's parenthood intentions. The results showed that, among the minority of couples holding discrepant childbearing desires, respondents' desires explained a significant increase in the variance of their spouses' parenthood intentions. Moreover, disagreement seemed to impart an inhibiting effect on childbearing intentions, such that discrepant couples were less likely to plan to have a(nother) child than were agreeing couples.

The second regression model examined the influence of spouses' childbearing intentions on subsequent births. Consistent with the first analysis, discrepant childbearing intentions reduced subsequent births. In particular, uncertain parenthood intentions on the part of either spouse reduced couples' subsequent birth rate by one-third. The likelihood of a subsequent birth was further reduced if spouses held discrepant childbearing intentions. Husbands' and wives' desires exerted approximately equal influence on one another's

childbearing intentions and subsequent births. In addition, several demographic variables were related to birth rates, including a wife's age, child parity, age of the youngest child, and religious affiliation.

Based on these findings, Thomson (1997) concluded that wives' and husbands' childbearing desires and intentions impart significant and comparable influence on their spouse's parenthood intentions and eventual births. Thomson furthermore contended that uncertain or discrepant childbearing desires and intentions may reduce couples' birth rates. These findings affirm parenthood decision-making as a jointly negotiated and constructed phenomenon, informed by both wives' and husbands' childbearing plans and the interaction thereof.

Wilk's Dual Career Childbearing Decision Model. Wilk (1986) proposed a model of parenthood decision-making in professional dual-career couples. Wilk analyzed interview and projective test data from 24 married, professional women, for those factors most significant to participants' childbearing choices. Specifically, data from unstructured interviews, along with the results from sentence completion and thematic apperception tests, revealed four factors most important to the parenthood decision-making process—namely, feminine intrapsychic factors, marital determinants, career determinants, and lifestyle determinants. Subjects were grouped into three categories depending on the nature of their fertility intentions. Interview data were then reviewed to determine the extent to which each childbearing determinant influenced subjects' fertility intentions. For example, Wilk observed that women harboring ambivalent childbearing intentions were less satisfied in their marriages and careers than were

intended mothers or voluntarily childless women. Ambivalent women were also less likely to describe their femininity in nurturing terms and were less flexible in accommodating to change, than were women in the intended motherhood or voluntarily childless groups. On the basis on these findings, Wilk concluded that professional women's childbearing decisions are influenced by intrapsychic, marital, career, and lifestyle determinants, and that the relative nature and salience of each determinant informs women's unique parenthood decisions. Although Wilk's study represents a formative conceptualization of the factors that women consider in formulating their childbearing intentions, several insufficiencies need to be mentioned.

First, the exclusion of male partners suggests a theoretical bias that assumes reproductive choice to be the sole domain of women. Indeed, the majority of research on family planning has used exclusively female samples. Reproductive decision-making may, however, be better conceptualized as an interpersonal process wherein committing to parenting or a childfree status is jointly negotiated between partners (Hoffman & Levant, 1985; Somers, 1993). Second, Wilk's (1986) research design and interpretation of data reveal a strong psychodynamic orientation. Clinicians who do not adhere to insight-based theory may have difficulty using this model to conceptualize the parenthood decision-making issues clients present in therapy. A third limitation of this study concerns the aforementioned discrepancies between childbearing intentions and behavior. Wilk's model assumes a linear and predictable relation between childbearing

intentions and reproductive behavior that may not accurately represent the parenthood decision-making process.

<u>Critique of Parenthood Decision-making Research</u>

Other researchers have investigated factors mediating the parenthood decision-making process (e.g., Hoffman & Levant, 1985; Kiesler & Silka, 1977; Payne, 1978; Somers, 1993). The clinical applicability of the results of these studies is limited for several reasons. First, as discussed above, the majority of research on reproductive choices employs exclusively female samples. This approach discounts the social contexts in which parenthood decision-making is embedded. The spousal relationship is an important source of social meaning. The quality of the marital dyad, in general, and husbands' and wives' reproductive intentions, in particular, may significantly influence their spouses' fertility plans. Indeed, Thomson (1997) concludes: "Omitting husbands' desires and intentions obscures the true relationship between childbearing desires and intentions and between intentions and outcomes . . . clearly husbands' views matter, adding to the case for routine collection of couple data in fertility research" (p. 343). Of those studies that do address the marital dyad as the unit of analysis (e.g., Bagozzi & Van Loo, 1980; Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Miller & Pasta, 1996; Soloway & Smith, 1987), most presume that reproductive outcomes represent a cumulative sum of spousal intentions. Husbands' and wives' fertility intentions may, however, impart an asymmetrical effect on their spouses' intentions, depending on spouses' respective ages, child parity, and birth-timing (e.g., Miller & Pasta, 1996; Thomson). Qualitative studies that seek to reveal the

lived experience of couples as they consider family planning options may better explicate the dynamics of couples' interactions as they bear on spouses' experiences of parenthood decision-making and reproductive outcomes.

Cohort effects further limit the relevance of previous research pursuits to modern individuals' and couples' reproductive choices. Dual career couples, for example, may confront issues that are unique to their age cohort and are thus time-bound. Parenthood decision-making is complex and variable, and is significantly informed by the cultural and temporal contexts in which such important decisions are made. Qualitative research could better reveal the family planning experience as it informs and is informed by individuals' unique personal realities, and the meaning individuals and couples bring to such an experience.

The present research aimed to impart a potentially unique contribution to empirical and clinical understanding of parenthood decision-making by explicating the individual and collective experiences of couples who have resolved both the decision of if, and when, to try to have children. Drawing on the experiences of couples who were originally unsure of their commitment to having children, and who have successfully resolved this original ambivalence, this study attempted to illuminate the phenomenon of parenthood decision-making from a previously neglected perspective. In addition, the present study aimed to augment past research on parenthood decision-making styles (e.g., Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Daniels and Weingarten, 1987), and the limitations inherent therein. In particular, this study attempted to illuminate the lived experiences, and meaning, of couples' decisions of if, and when, to have children.

Advancing on accounts of parenthood decision-making styles, the study endeavored to reveal how external, interpersonal, and individual factors impact upon participants' childbearing plans, and how couples understand and experience parenthood decision-making. This research should add considerably to our knowledge of how couples today decide on, and make meaning of, the desirability and timing of parenthood in their lives.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

This qualitative study reveals, through phenomenology, the experience for eight couples of deciding on the viability and timing of parenthood in their lives. Phenomenological interviews were used to discover and explicate the intrapersonal and interpersonal experience through which these couples meaningfully constructed and considered parenthood alternatives. Participants' descriptions were analyzed for deep meaning structures (Osborne, 1990; van Manen, 1990), and themes and patterns common across multiple cases were identified.

<u>Research Design</u>

<u>Phenomenology</u>. Phenomenology seeks to reveal the experiential world of the individual knower (Colaizzi, 1978), that is, the "lifeworld" (van Manen, 1990). More specifically, phenomenological research aims to elucidate the "actuality of lived experience" (Osborne, 1990, p. 68) through an exploration of the individual's inner world of values, beliefs, and personal meanings. The focus is on the individual's experience and understanding of his or her world (Osborne), and is thus necessarily subjective. Personal insight constitutes both the object and source of understanding of the meaning of human phenomena (Roty, 1979). Husserl (in van Manen) described this process of phenomenological research as inquiry "into the things themselves" (p. 31), and advocated for the exploration of human consciousness as it constitutes reality.

Phenomenology's focus on subjective realities and lived experience represents a marked departure from the tenets of natural science, the latter of which have traditionally informed psychological research and practice. Natural science seeks to quantify human experience, and posits explanatory laws to explain and predict behavior. In contrast, phenomenological research is discovery-oriented. The aim is to illuminate the essence of a phenomenon through contact with the experience of individuals as they are naturally engaged in their worlds of meaning (van Manen, 1990). Knowledge is perspectival (Osborne, 1990), and cannot be divorced from the knower's unique self- and world-views and from the personal meanings he or she brings to each experience (Patton, 1990). Furthermore, objective realities cannot be separated from the individual's subjective experience. Rather, individuals actively constitute their worlds: they are constitutive, rather than observers of, their realities (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994). Research efforts must therefore "describe the world-as-experienced" (Baker, Wuest, & Noerager Stern, 1992), such that the individual's own point of view and understanding of the phenomenon is manifest.

That is, phenomenology is a descriptive science that endeavors to "contact the phenomena as people experience it" (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 57). The goal is to achieve a perspectival understanding of the phenomenon under study such that the knower's own voice is honored: ". . . the aim is to understand a phenomenon by allowing the data to speak for themselves, and by attempting to put aside one's preconceptions" (Osborne, 1990, p. 81). A priori explanations and categorizations are avoided in favor of an introspective exploration of the

individual's lived experiences and the meaning that he or she brings to those experiences. Individuals' phenomenological reflections are necessarily recollective as they represent accounts of experiences already lived (van Manen, 1990). The goal of phenomenological research is thus to clarify and extract the plausibility of descriptive accounts—that is, the essence of the individual's sense of the experience—rather than to extract factual information. Respondents' accounts, or "living texts" (Hoshmand, 1994) merge into shared structures of meaning (Osborne, van Manen) to reveal the essential structure of the phenomenon (Patton, 1990). Universal meanings are embedded in particular experiences and across descriptive accounts. "Mining" these shared meanings is the principal task of the phenomenological researcher (van Manen), and constitutes the process by which the experiential meanings that we live by are revealed.

Phenomenology represents a useful approach for exploring the research question: **What is the meaning and experience of deciding to start a family for couples who were initially uncertain about having children?** The dearth of research that has explored parenthood decision-making thus far has emerged from a restricted field of inquiry that interprets data from a priori theoretical assumptions. Indeed, van Manen (1984) comments that much of everyday knowledge is arrived at prematurely, that is, "before we have come to grips with the significance of the phenomenological question" (p. 46) of what is to truly live an experience.

Few experiences are as endemic and consequential to everyday life as is deciding if, and when, to have children, and subsequently moving past intentions in acting on these decisions. And yet despite the significance of parenthood decision-making in individuals' lives, and the aforementioned research efforts to better understand the phenomenon, little is actually known about the lived experience of parenthood decision-making, and the individual and collective meanings with which spouses endow this experience. In inviting participants to describe the experience of decision- and meaning-making in their own voices, I aimed to return to the more formative, descriptive lens of phenomenology (Osborne, 1990; van Manen, 1984). I aimed to stay "closer to the meaning of human experience," and, in so doing, to extend upon extant literature on parenthood decision-making, and to suggest potential directions for future research and counselling practice. Specifically, minimally structured interviews were used to elicit rich descriptions of couples' experiences and understandings regarding the decision of if, and when, to attempt to have children. As this study sought to explore the nature and meaning of parenthood decision-making as it is negotiated and acted upon within the context of the spousal relationship, participants' accounts were reviewed for universal meanings that were represented in all participants' experiences, that is, meanings shared between and among spouses. These shared structures of meaning revealed commonalities in individuals' experiences of parenthood decision-making, set against the backdrop of the spousal relationship within which the decision of if, and when, to have a child is ultimately constructed.

Bracketing. Phenomenology posits that knowledge is perspectival (Osborne, 1990). The researcher's contextualized frame of reference and preconceptions necessarily influences the formulation of research questions and the collection, interpretation, and presentation of the data. The researcher's examination of personal presuppositions regarding the phenomena under study is manifest in a commitment to " . . . respectful listening to what the phenomenon speaks of itself" (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 52). The researcher endeavors to place his or her presuppositions "outside of the phenomena" (Husserl, 1970b) as much as possible so as to maintain the integrity of the lived experiences from the participants' point of view.

Bracketing is a process of self-reflection that serves to make explicit implicit biases and preconceptions that the researcher holds about the phenomenon of interest (Osborne, 1990; van Manen, 1984; 1990). Bracketing affords the reader access to the researcher's conceptual framework (van Manen, 1984) such that the reader is better able to judge the trustworthiness of the data. More specifically, naming and examining one's presuppositions enhances the credibility and confirmability of the researcher's data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility concerns the faithfulness of the researcher's depiction of participants' accounts, while confirmability serves as a measure of researcher neutrality. Bracketing furthermore affords the researcher an opportunity to examine personal presuppositions as they color his or her approach to, and understanding of, the phenomenon of interest (Kvale, 1983; Osborne).

My interest in and presuppositions about parenthood decision-making are informed by my personal experiences, as well as by my clinical practice as a family and marital therapist. On a personal level, the process of parenthood decision-making is one in which I have been deeply embedded. As a young educated women in a committed dual-career relationship, I was confronted with a host of family planning alternatives which did not readily comply with a rational weighing of pros and cons. Rather, I found that the meanings with which I endowed various parenthood options were significantly and inextricably tied to my own family of origin experiences, my partner's childbearing desires, and my gendered values. I have always wanted children, and understand this desire to reflect my own very positive childhood experiences and continued closeness with my parents; my sense of faith and stability in my spousal relationship; and the fulfillment that I derive from maternal roles. Despite recognizing potential financial and professional gains to a childfree lifestyle, I believe that children can bring a richness and fulfillment to life that is not attainable through material reward. These understandings and beliefs likely sensitize me to the influence of family of origin experiences and relationship factors as they bear on individuals' decisions of if, and when, to have children. This personal perspective likely further sensitizes me to others' perceptions of the benefits of parenthood versus a childfree lifestyle.

My own experience of parenthood decision-making has involved personal and shared contemplation and conversation regarding how and when to incorporate parenthood into mine and my spouse's relationship, lives, and busy

careers. Although family and friends have sometimes shared insights and thoughts on this, my relationship with my spouse has been the most important context in which I have engaged parenthood- and other decision-making endeavors. I am thus likely to be particularly attuned to the role of the spousal relationship in parenthood decision-making, in particular, to the way in which couples jointly consider and construct parenthood alternatives in their lives.

Professionally, the challenge of deciding if and when to have children is an experience described by many of my clients. Indeed, parenthood decision-making may serve as a primary reason why some individuals and couples seek counselling. In my experience, spouses may present to counselling with discrepant childbearing, child-timing, or family size desires and intentions. These incompatibilities can create significant intrapersonal and interpersonal distress. In working with couples attempting to resolve these and other important decision-making endeavors, I draw primarily on systemic family therapy principles (e.g., Bowen, 1978; Haley, 1976). Correspondingly, I assume an ecological perspective that focuses on the social context in which problems evolve, including the current marital relationship, as well as transgenerational systems. I believe that family members' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors impact, and are impacted by the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of others within the family system. I view extreme emotional reactivity as a significant source of marital distress, and also believe that misunderstandings and miscommunication—especially in regard to expectations of one another and roles in the family system—underlie family dysfunction. I also sometimes draw on strategic therapy principles (Haley, 1976;

Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974), assuming that couples' attempted

solutions to problems may maintain, exacerbate, or even become, the foremost

problem. Given these theoretical beliefs, I typically work with couples to

examine transgenerational patterns and rules; to develop more flexible ways of

relating to one another; to reduce emotional reactivity; and to clarify expectations

and communication. While these principles contribute a critical conceptual base

from which I understand and work with couples, I find that this and other marital

therapy approaches fail to offer adequate direction on how to assist clients to

work through the highly emotional and consequential decision of whether or not

to have a child. Recognizing these shortcomings and wishing to better understand

the experience by which couples resolve their decision-making difficulties in

favor of having children, I began speaking informally to clients, colleagues, and

peers who had realized satisfying parenthood decisions. This research serves to

formalize that endeavor.

My presuppositions about parenthood decision-making reflect my

personal and clinical experiences, as well as a review of the decision-making

literature. First, consistent with family planning research (e.g., Hoffman &

Levant, 1985; Somers, 1993; Thompson, 1997) and my systemic approach to

couples therapy, I assume that parenthood decision-making is embedded in the

dyadic interchange of desires, values, intentions, and reproductive behavior

between spouses. Spouses' relative contributions to, and power over,

reproductive decisions will vary between couples. Spouses sharing a traditional

marriage may more easily resolve discrepant childbearing intentions, as the

sphere of influence in these marriages is more clearly delineated than in egalitarian marriages. Discordant spouses in nontraditional marriages may be less willing to compromise their desires and intentions to arrive at a successful, mutually satisfying resolution.

A second presupposition concerns age as it may mediate couples' experiences of parenthood decision-making. A large number of couples, particularly those in dual-career marriages, are delaying childbearing into their thirties (Statistics Canada, 1999). I expect that these couples will confront different issues than couples intending a first birth at an earlier age. For example, issues around gendered values, and the loss of professional and financial autonomy and recreational time, may be more salient for older couples.

A third and final presupposition represents a departure from traditional conceptualizations of parenthood decision-making as a linear and predictable process. I expect that couples' engagement in parenthood decision-making oscillates between periods of active dialogue about childbearing alternatives and periods of personal introspection. Couples may revisit dominant themes and concerns over the course of months or years, and may decide to act despite, rather than because of, the successful resolution of these concerns.

Research Procedure

Participants. Phenomenological research seeks to describe and elucidate the essence of human existence from the perspective of the individual knower (Osborne, 1990; van Manen, 1990). Subjective experience is the target of inquiry. Participants' experiences are "borrowed" in an attempt to gain a rich

understanding of the significance and meaning of the topic under study (van Manen). Participants are thus viewed as co-researchers, and are selected because of their ability to articulate the phenomenon of interest (Colaizzi, 1978).

Criteria. Volunteer participants were invited to reflect on their experiences in deciding on the viability and timing of parenthood in their lives. Participants were childless couples who had not made a commitment to having or not having children when they first became partners. More precisely, one or both partners had to have expressly indicated uncertainty as to the intention to parent. At the time of recruitment, couples were pregnant, or were actively pursuing a pregnancy. That is, couples were acting on the intention to have at least one child, and may or may not have achieved a pregnancy prior to the interview process. In addition, participants were not aware of any diagnosed male or female fertility impairment that could jeopardize their childbearing intentions. Infertility may impart profound intrapersonal and interpersonal challenges (e.g., Mahlstedt, 1985; Slade, Raval, Buck, & Lieberman, 1992) that render the experience of parenthood decision-making particularly complex. Infertility and parenthood decision-making, although a worthy topic of study, is beyond the scope of this research. Finally, both spouses had to agree to participate in one process interview, as well as a validation interview to be conducted several months thereafter. Selecting couples who had moved from a state of ambivalence regarding their parenthood intentions to actively pursuing a first birth served two purposes. First, these couples were able to articulate their experiences in deciding on the viability and desirability of parenthood in their lives, and their experiences

in deciding on the relative timing of a first birth. Their descriptive accounts therefore richly illuminated both the lived experience of deciding if *and* when to have children, and the experiential meanings endowed in those decisions. Second, recruiting couples that were in the action stage of parenthood decision-making overcomes the aforementioned methodological shortcoming of using childbearing intentions as a proxy for childbearing actions.

To sufficiently illuminate couples' experiences in deciding on the viability and timing of their first birth, volunteer couples were recruited until such a time that no new themes were emerging from couples' accounts. The intent of this study was not to produce generalizable results (Osborne, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1989). Rather, a small number of participants was thought sufficient to generate a rich description of the particularities and commonalities of couples' experiences with parenthood decision-making, and to evoke and satiate themes therein.

Recruitment. The research proposal was subject to the University's ethical review procedures. Upon attaining ethical approval, potential participants were recruited through advertisements placed in local newspapers and at various community locations, including two regional university campuses and local physicians' and midwives' offices (see Appendix A). These advertisements were also used to recruit volunteers from prenatal and infant care classes, offered through local health regions. Individuals who were interested in participating in the study were asked to contact me by phone. Informal telephone interviews were conducted with the spouse who had made the initial contact. At that time, I provided additional information to potential participants, including more detailed

information about the goals and nature of the study and the time commitment involved (see Appendix B). As well, potential participants were asked a series of screening questions to ensure that they meet the inclusion requirements listed above (see Appendix C). Consistent with the collaborative and voluntary nature of phenomenological inquiry (Hoshmand, 1994; Osborne, 1990), participants were invited to ask questions about the study and were fully informed about their right to refuse to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time. Arrangements for the first interview were made at this time, including the date, time, and location of the meeting.

In total, eight couples were recruited over a period of approximately four months. Seven couples were pregnant at the time of the first interview. Two couples were in the second trimester of their pregnancies, while five couples where in their last trimester. One couple was pursuing a pregnancy at the time of data collection, and had not yet achieved a pregnancy by the study's conclusion.

The lengthy and rather arduous recruitment process in which I engaged is perhaps noteworthy. Despite showing obvious interest in the study's topic, many couples contacted through prenatal classes would not take the recruitment advertisements made available to them. Among the couples who did ultimately volunteer for the study, some told me that they had been "embarrassed…to [publicly] question" the desirability of parenthood in their lives. Others shared that they were uncomfortable with their peers' recognition that they and their spouses may have had difficulties resolving discrepant childbearing intentions. These experiences were further confirmed by the observations of prenatal

instructors, physicians, and midwives who had offered to hand out recruitment advertisements. Many shared that, despite knowing of particular couples who would indeed met the recruitment criteria, some couples would either refuse the advertisements, or would avail themselves of contact information only when left alone in an examining room or after other couples had left the class. These observations suggest that couples having difficulties resolving whether and when to pursue parenthood continue to perceive their experience to be unusual, and fear that they may be marginalized by their peers and society at large for their doubts about the desirability of parenthood in their lives. Despite considerable societal change in the roles of women and men and the appearance of reproductive choice, it seems that parenthood is still an expected transition in adults' lives.

Data Collection

Verbal and written accounts of lived experiences constitute the primary objects and sources of data in phenomenological research (Osborne, 1994; van Manen, 1990). These accounts may be gleaned from interviews, couple and group dialogue, diaries, and personal or group narratives (Osborne, 1990). Phenomenological interviews serve as a form of intensive, contextualized inquiry (Hoshmand, 1994) into participants' subjective experiences and worlds of meaning, and are the most common means of gathering data. The goal of the phenomenological interview is to elicit rich descriptions of the phenomenon of interest, as experienced and understood from the participant's perspective: "It is always a project of someone: a real person, who, in the context of particular individual, social, and historical circumstances, sets out to make sense of a certain

aspect of human experience" (van Manen, p. 31). The dialogical relationship (Hoshmand) is central to the interview process: phenomenological accounts are co-constructed through the exchange of goals and assumptions about the topic of inquiry and the meaning of shared discourse. Phenomenological questions serve to orient the interview process, and represent the quest for thick accounts of what it is "really" like to experientially live the phenomenon of interest (van Manen).

In this study, interviews were used to elicit detailed descriptions of parenthood decision-making, as experienced and understood by participating couples. More specifically, an in-depth, audio-taped interview was conducted with each couple. Validation interviews were conducted after the data had been analyzed, that is, about four months within the date of the original interviews. All interviews were conducted by myself, the principal researcher of the study. Each interview lasted approximately two hours, and, based on participants' preferences, all took place in private homes.

The goal of these minimally structured interviews was to empower participants to find, and speak in, their own voice as they shared their experiences of deciding on the viability, desirability, and timing of parenthood in their lives. I assumed a facilitative role in this process. That is, open-ended questions, active listening, affective reflections, and probes were used to elicit rich personal accounts of the issues and challenges that participants faced in deciding among and making sense of parenthood alternatives. Participants were encouraged to direct the flow of topics addressed, and the manner in which their experiences were articulated. To this end, I avoided the use of leading questions that may

have serviced my own preconceived assumptions rather than the full and personal

expression of the participants' lived experiences (van Manen, 1990). I tracked

topics in need of clarification or further elaboration. After participants had

completed their thoughts, open-ended questions were sometimes used to elicit a

more detailed and deeper account of these issues. In addition, orienting questions

were sometimes used to encourage elaboration on issues pertinent to parenthood

decision-making, in general (see Appendix D).

The Interview Process. The first interview took place within one month of

initial telephone contact with potential participants. The primary purpose of this

interview was to establish rapport (Osborne, 1990) and to invite participating

couples to jointly address the research question: **What is the meaning and**

experience of deciding to start a family for couples who were initially

uncertain about having children? Couple interviews were used to help situate

the recollection of spouses' experiences in the dyadic relationship, and, in so

doing, to honor and reveal the influence that spouses' childbearing intentions and

actions may have had on one another's experience of parenthood decision-making

(Hoffman & Levant, 1985; Somers, 1993; Thompson, 1997). While phenomena

are necessarily and primarily lived through the individual's conscious experience,

this experience is coconstitutional of, and embedded within, his or her world

(Osborne, 1990; van Manen, 1982). Couple and group data has been used

effectively by other phenomenological researchers to study various experiences,

including lesbian couples' experiences of motherhood (Macgregor, 1997),

families' perspectives and functioning during a child's illness (Duffy, 1982), adult

daughters and their mothers' experience of healthy relationships (Schiff, 1997), and high school students' experiences with tobacco use (McVea, Harter, McEntarffer, & Creswell, 1999). In each of these cases, conjoint interviewing was used to help situate the data within the spousal, familial, and social contexts within which participants' experiences were lived and understood.

In electing to use couple interviewing in this study, it was recognized that individuals' accounts of their decision-making experiences would be restricted to what spouses were willing to reveal in the presence of one another. Indeed Thomson (1997) posits that parenthood and other spousal decision-making endeavors may be mediated, and ultimately resolved, through the exchange of gendered power. Although most couples in the present study described their relationships as egalitarian, and none endorsed power differentials as having influenced their parenthood decisions, it is possible that the use of couple interviews precluded a full account of participants' decision-making experiences. It is also possible that spouses edited their accounts to minimize discrepancies and difficulties in their experiences of deciding if, and when, to have children. These limitations are further addressed in the Discussion chapter to follow.

Despite these potential disadvantages, couple interviewing was thought to be most suited to the focus and objectives of the present study. For the purposes of this phenomenological investigation, interviewing couples together afforded a glimpse of the "interaction of the intentionalities" of spouses (Osborne, 1990)— that is, the way that spouses' individual understandings and experiences of parenthood decision-making were embedded, and ultimately negotiated and co-

constructed within, the marital relationship. As mentioned previously, an oft cited criticism of parenthood decision-making literature is the reliance on female data, to the exclusion of husbands' accounts and experiences (Hoffman & Levant, 1985; Somers, 1993; Thomson, 1997). Well documented is the fact that spouses' parenthood decisions reflect the input of both wives and husbands, and that, with the exception of women who elect to become sole support mothers, the decision is ultimately negotiated and acted upon within the spousal dyad (Hoffman & Levant; Miller & Pasta, 1996; Thomson). As such, it was hoped that interviewing couples together would help situate spouses' accounts, and, concomitantly, these data, within the social context in which the phenomenology of parenthood decision-making was experienced. Finally, it was thought that couple interviewing would afford spouses an opportunity to monitor and verify each other's descriptive accounts. Indeed, several researchers contend that this approach may support more trustworthy recollections (Daniels and Weingarten, 1982: LaRossa, 1977).

To begin the first interview, I reviewed the nature, conditions, and parameters of the study. Spouses were reassured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and, furthermore, were fully informed of the study's confidentiality protocol. Each spouse was then asked to choose a pseudonym, known only to the participant and to myself, for the purpose of ensuring participants' anonymity. Participants were also told that tapes of each interview would be erased once the study was complete. After this briefing, participants were given a chance to ask any questions about the study that may have arisen

since the initial telephone contact. Next, spouses were each asked to read and sign two copies of an ethical consent form (see Appendix E). Participants were given one copy for their records and I retained one copy.

To commence the first interview, an orienting statement was read to participants (see Appendix F). The purpose of this statement was to focus participants on the phenomenon of interest, namely, their experience of parenthood decision-making. This statement also identified the main research question. Participants were invited to describe their experience of parenthood decision-making in as detailed a manner as possible. Throughout the interviews, I yielded to participants' spontaneous verbalizations, and used questions only as necessary to solicit more detailed descriptions of participants' experiences. At the end of the first interview, I specified a date by which time I would contact participating couples regarding arrangements for the validation interview. This was estimated to be within three to four months of the first interview.

Validation interviews were conducted after participants' descriptive accounts had been subject to thematic analysis. The goal of phenomenological research is to reveal the essential structures of lived experience (van Manen, 1990). Common themes should therefore cohere closely with participants' experiences of the phenomenon of interest. The purpose of the validation interviews in this study was two-fold. First, participants were asked to review and verify a written synopsis of their biographical information to ensure that their accounts of parenthood decision-making had been accurately portrayed. A second purpose of the validation interviews was to provide participants with an

opportunity to review and verify the common themes that had been extracted from participants' accounts of parenthood decision-making. Participants were mailed their biographical profiles and the common themes approximately four months after the first interview. Immediately prior to mailing this material, I contacted all participants by phone to explain the purpose and nature of the validation interviews. More precisely, participants were asked to examine the common themes and to determine if they resonated with, or were discrepant from, their own lived experience of parenthood decision-making. Participants were also asked to review the accuracy of their profiles. I re-contacted participants by telephone approximately one week after having mailed the profiles and common themes, to conduct the validation interview. Telephone interviews were necessary, as I had moved out of the Lower Mainland to complete my doctoral internship in the Okanagan at this time. In all but one case, I spoke to both spouses, in turn, about their impressions of the biographical and thematic material.

During these final interviews, which ranged from ten to forty minutes, I invited participants to share any comments or suggestions regarding the material. Specifically, participants were asked to speak openly and honestly about the "fit" between their experiences and the thematic descriptions. Participants were also asked to verify the accuracy of their profiles. I recorded the conversations in shorthand, and participants were assured that any suggested changes would be taken into consideration in the final data presentation.

With regard to their demographic information, almost all participants confirmed the accuracy of their profiles. Two couples indicated that their length of marriage was one year off that which was reported in the initial profiles. Furthermore, one male participant asked that a statement indicating his academic background be reworded to emphasis his focus of study. These changes were incorporated into the final presentation of participants' profiles. With the exception of one couple, all the men and women in the study indicated that the thematic descriptions resonated intensely with their own parenthood decision-making experiences. Participants used terms such as "It's dead on," "It's perfect," and "It really jived with our experience" to describe how closely the themes captured their own journeys. In fact, I often found myself hard-pressed to continue the interviews, as participants repeatedly stated that they had no changes to suggest. Two couples commented that they planned to preserve the material for when their newborns were older, such that their child "...will see how thoughtfully he came into this world." In one interview, both spouses commented that certain themes applied to their experiences more closely than did others. The female spouse noted that, as she had always wanted children, themes dealing with costs and fears of parenthood did not well relate to her experience. Her husband similarly suggested that the valuing of autonomy and worldly adventure discussed in the theme of the costs of parenthood did not resonate with his self-perceptions. In lieu of this feedback, I revisited the relevant themes, and reworded or reworked some sections to more truthfully and accurately convey the extent to which the themes related to various participants' experiences.

Data Analysis

Phenomenology seeks to reveal the essence of lived experience: "We explain nature, but human life we must understand" (Dilthey, in van Manen, 1990, p. 4). Data analysis involves an intensive process of thematic analysis with the goal of revealing the meaning of a lived phenomenon (van Manen). Validation interviews support the soundness and trustworthiness of the common themes extracted across individual accounts.

Thematic Analysis. Valle and King (1978) posit two goals of thematic analysis. First, the researcher must condense individuals' accounts to essential meaning structures that unify the lived experience of the phenomenon of interest. Second, in extracting structures of meaning from individual accounts, the researcher must remain as faithful as possible to participants' original characterization of that phenomenon.

In this study, data analysis followed the procedures outlined by Colaizzi (1978). Specifically, thematic analysis began with an intensive and exhaustive review of participants' account of parenthood decision-making. Importantly, as wives and husbands were interviewed together in this study, I first looked for statements within each transcript that seemed particularly significant to either spouse's account and most pertinent to parenthood decision-making. These thematic statements often recurred in participants' descriptions over the course of their interviews, thus suggesting that they were salient aspects of the experience of parenthood decision-making (Fischer, 1978; van Manen, 1990). This process of "mining" or "seeing" meaning in individual accounts constitutes the first stage

of thematic analysis, and affords the researcher a glimpse of the thematic "stars that make up the universes of meaning we live through" (van Manen, p. 90).

Next, significant statements extracted from each transcript were organized into clusters of shared meanings (Colaizzi, 1978). As the purpose of this study was to explore couples' experiences of parenthood decision-making, extracted statements were those that reflected a shared experience, that is, an experience alluded to by both wives and husbands. While details of wives' and husbands' descriptions potentially differed, extracted statements revealed a shared, common *meaning*. A husband, for example, might speak to his perceptions of parenthood as the potential loss of professional freedoms. His wife might express her concerns regarding parenthood as a threat to career mobility. In this example, an experiential commonality (van Manen, 1984) is seemingly captured, that is, participants' sense of the professional costs of parenthood. In lifting statements that revealed a shared meaning in wives' and husbands' accounts, I attempted to highlight the meanings that were essential and shared between and among spouses.

It is noteworthy that spouses spoke of very similar experiences, fears, perceptions, attitudes, and values in their accounts of parenthood decision-making. A typical sequence would involve one spouse describing a particular experience—for instance a wife speaking of her initial concerns that parenthood would negatively impact her marriage—followed by her spouse's endorsement of, and elaboration on, how that experience was felt and lived for him. It is perhaps not surprising that spouses described very similar experiences, as partners

typically share common values, attitudes, and beliefs (Cunningham & Antill,

1994; Kerckhoff & Davis, 1962), and consider and construct parenthood

decisions within their relationships (e.g., Miller & Pasta, 1996; Thomson, 1997).

The extent to which spouse's experiences cohered in this study may have

furthermore reflected the unique nature of the sample use, namely, couples who

had arrived at mutually satisfying family planning decisions.

Clusters of statements that were similar in meaning were thus generated

for each couple. Each cluster, in turn, was subject to a process of thematic

deduction whereby formulated meanings were applied to each statement cluster

(Colaizzi, 1978; Osborne, 1990). To ensure that the mined meanings were

representative of participants' original accounts, I engaged in a rigorous process

of rereading and reevaluating the interview transcripts in an effort to refine the

meanings extracted from individual accounts.

Once each couple's transcript had been subject to thematic clustering,

formulated meanings extracted from each couple's account of parenthood

decision-making were merged and organized into common phenomenological

themes across accounts (Colaizzi, 1978; Osborne, 1990; van Manen, 1990).

This hermeneutical process entailed a skillful interpretation of the structure of

meaning of participants' lived experiences, and required that I differentiate

between incidental and essential themes (van Manen). While the former may

have represented meanings significant to individual accounts of parenthood

decision-making, the latter attempted to reveal the essential structure of a

phenomenon and were the target of my interpretive labors: "Essential themes . . .

make a phenomenon what it is and without [it] the phenomenon could not be what

it is" (van Manen, p. 107). Original transcripts and thematic clusters were

revisited and re-evaluated in an effort to refine common themes such that they

faithfully depicted the structure of meaning of couples' experiences of parenthood

decision-making.

It is important to note that couples' descriptions were remarkably similar,

regardless of differences in their stage of pregnancy. Indeed, as detailed above,

the only participants who suggested any changes to the thematic descriptions were

the husband and wife who had not yet become pregnant. Although their overall

accounts cohered closely with other participants, these participants seemed to

place less emphasis on the costs and fears of parenthood that others so saliently

experienced in deciding whether and when to have children. This seems to run

counter to the observations of some authors who contend that pregnant couples or

parents—having realized a "point of no return"--may emphasize their reasons for

wanting children, as opposed to the potential costs of parenthood (e.g., Hoffman

& Levant, 1985). A possible explanation for the discrepancies in this study is that

the childless couple was more focused on the potential benefits of parenthood

because they were still hoping to achieve a pregnancy. Fear may have been a

more salient experience for pregnant couples who were confronted with the

imminent and irrevocable consequences of becoming parents.

Final themes, then, reflected the common experiences of parenthood

decision-making, as endorsed, lived, and understood by all participants in this

study. While aspects of these themes may have differed between husbands and

wives, or between couples, the themes reveal a shared meaning of what it is to live the experience of deciding to start a family.

Data Presentation. van Manen (1984) describes five methods for structuring phenomenological descriptions. Thematic descriptions, for example, are structured around themes, whereas analytic descriptions involve a more critical presentation of the data. According to van Manen, the latter might involve showing how various everyday experiences are ill-understood or ineptly conceptualized. Exemplicative descriptions use examples to expand on an initial description of a phenomenon. Existential writing, a fourth means of presenting data, situates phenomenological descriptions against the themes of temporality, spatiality, corporeality, and communality. Finally, van Manen describes exegetical writing as "engaging one's writing in a dialogical or exegetical fashion with the thinking of some other phenomenological author" (p. 67). Although van Manen contends that "there is no compelling reason for structuring a phenomenological description in any one particular way" (p. 66), he does recommend that the approach used be decided, in part, on the nature of the phenomenon being investigated.

In this study, phenomenological descriptions are presented thematically. This choice was suggested by the nature of participants' descriptions and by the purpose of the present inquiry. As phenomenology endeavors to achieve a perspectival understanding of participants' lived experiences (Osborne, 1990), descriptions should stay as close to participants' accounts as possible. With little direction, participants in this study recounted their experiences of parenthood

decision-making in a topical way. For example, participants spoke to a shift in their perceptions about parenthood and, without prodding or direction from me, would typically fill in their understanding of how and why this happened. Participants' accounts, then, suggested the choice of presentation in that the data seemed to bear on inherent thematic organization and structure. As well, a thematic presentation paralleled closely the objective of this study, specifically, to reveal the shared themes that seemed to structure participants' experiences of parenthood decision-making.

Trustworthiness of the Data

This qualitative study sought to reveal couples' experiences of deciding on the viability, desirability, and timing of parenthood in their lives, and the meaning endowed in those experiences. The goal was to produce an oriented and strong text that faithfully and richly describes the structure of this experience and that invites critical dialogue from the research and clinical community (van Manen, 1990). The quality of phenomenological research is indexed by the trustworthiness of the results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Valle & King, 1978). In this study, the trustworthiness of the findings depends on the extent to which the findings illuminate the nature and meaning of participants' experiences of formulating and acting on childbearing decisions.

Osborne (1990) suggests several methods for assessing and supporting the trustworthiness of phenomenological research. First, whereas natural science is concerned with consistent, replicable, and stable results, phenomenology recognizes sameness (reliability) to be perspectival. That is, multiple, even

discrepant perspectives on the same phenomenon can merge into unified descriptions of the meaning of a shared phenomenon through "intersubjective agreement" (Osborne). In this study, participant reviews of thematic clusters and common themes extracted from participants' accounts were used to inform a unified and trustworthy description of the meaning and experience of parenthood decision-making. In particular, validation interviews afforded a means to assess the "goodness-of-fit" or congruence between my interpretations and participants' own accounts of their experiences.

A second means of enhancing the trustworthiness of phenomenological research is to create a "chain of evidence" of the manner in which the research was carried out (Yin, 1984). In this study, a detailed description of the research procedure is provided such that other researchers may follow the decisions and interpretive process in which I engaged to arrive at the final results (Beck, 1993).

Bracketing is a third means of enhancing the trustworthiness of phenomenological research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Osborne, 1990). More specifically, identifying one's presuppositions about the phenomenon of interest edifies the highly perspectival nature of knowledge and allows readers to understand the researcher's orientation to, and interpretation of, the data. In this study, I continued to engage in a process of reflective awareness of my assumptions about parenthood decision-making. I kept a private research journal over the course of the study wherein spontaneous thoughts, feelings, or reactions to the phenomenon of interest were recorded. The purpose of this journal was to externalize, and thus keep at bay, my preconceived notions or biases (van Manen,

1990). Regularly revisiting original interview transcripts further supported my neutrality and, concomitantly, accurate descriptions of participants' experiences and worlds of meaning. Common themes were continually referred back to original data to minimize and correct for any distortions in my interpretation of participants' accounts.

To conclude, this study aimed to begin to illuminate the intrapersonal and interpersonal meanings that inform couples' experiences of parenthood decision-making. It was hoped that this research would both advance empirical and clinical understanding of this critical experience in couples' lives, and would inspire more inquiry into parenthood decision-making.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

This chapter begins with a brief, biographical synopsis of the eight couples

participating in this study. An in depth discussion of the common themes

extracted across participants' accounts of their parenthood decision-making

experiences will follow.

Participants' Profiles

Three couples participating in this study were recruited through a poster

campaign that was conducted in local physicians' offices and on a university

campus. Five couples were recruited through community prenatal classes. In the

interest of anonymity and confidentiality, participants choose a pseudonym at the

outset of each interview. To follow is a biological profile of each couple wherein

particularly salient aspects of their respective parenthood decision-making

experiences are highlighted.

Patricia and Tony. Patricia, 35 years old, and Tony, 34 years old, have

been together for 11 years. Married three years ago, they began actively

deliberating about the possibility of having a family in the last year and were eight

months pregnant at the time of the interview. Prior to actively contemplating

parenthood, Patricia had been ambivalent in terms of her desire to have children.

She described her position as one of "postponement", and foresaw parenthood as

a "possibility...far in the future." Throughout her twenties and early thirties,

Patricia devoted her energies to completing an undergraduate degree in Political

Science and building a self-employed career in event management.

Tony is also self-employed. After completing an undergraduate degree in International Relations, he turned his attention to developing a small public relations and communications company. Tony's initial and present position on having children was unchanged: he desired a family and perceived parenthood as the "natural order of things." Affording Patricia the time that she needed to arrive at a sense of readiness for parenthood herself, Tony noted that he has always been the "risk-taker" in their relationship. He understood Patricia's ambivalence as due, in part, to her "conservative nature" and her concerns over his "less than stable" career.

In describing their experience of parenthood decision-making, both implicated a variety of facilitating factors—for example, concerns over advancing age, a conscious reordering of priorities, and a decision to proceed despite Patricia's nagging doubts. They felt these factors eventually supplanted Patricia's initial ambivalence and solidified Tony's resolve to begin a family. In Patricia's words: "It wasn't *a* conversation or *a* factor. It was sitting with it, working it in my mind, talking. It just kind of came to a point of feeling ready." At the time of the interview, Patricia and Tony both looked forward to the imminent arrival of their first child with enthusiasm.

Ilsa and Rick. Ilsa and Rick, both thirty-four, have been together for twelve years and married for five years. Previous to this, Ilsa was in another marriage for three years. Throughout the course of most of their relationship, neither Ilsa nor Rick had a desire to have children. Both recalled having briefly discussed the issue of parenthood when they first met, and having shared a mutual

disdain for the perceived "burdens" and "hassles" of parenthood. Ilsa pursued a managerial career in a major fitness company, and after an "uphill battle" earned the prestigious position of its Vice President Administrator. Rick has worked at a large steel plant for several years, and enjoys refurbishing old cars in his spare time. Ilsa's career aspirations, coupled with hers and Rick's mutual passion for a variety of leisure pursuits and hobbies, were well suited to the freedoms and flexibility of a childfree lifestyle.

On the "same page" regarding their shared commitment to childlessness until one year ago, the couple recalled Ilsa's emerging awareness of the potential rewards and benefits of parenthood and her growing doubts about their childfree choice. Propelled into a trying reassessment and realignment of professional and personal priorities, Ilsa and Rick reflected on having arrived at a sense of readiness for parenthood at different times. Ilsa described her experience as eventually "jumping from one side of the fence to the other" and adopting a "totally different way of thinking" regarding the many benefits, rather than the costs, of parenthood. Rick, on the other hand, maintained a "neutral" attitude towards beginning a family. Honoring his commitment to the marriage and conceding to his wife's wishes, Rick spoke of being "cautiously excited" about parenthood at the time of the interview. Ilsa was then entering her fifth month of pregnancy.

Natalie and Bill. Natalie, a 31 year old child and family counselor, and Bill, a 38 year old actor who previously pursued graduate studies in Political Science, met nine years ago. Married for three years, they initially held very

discrepant intentions regarding parenthood. Natalie spoke of having "always wanted children" and of having articulated those desires to Bill early on in their relationship. Although very fond of children, Bill did not initially perceive parenthood to be a realistic option given the time demands and instability of his chosen career as an actor.

Natalie and Bill's discrepant parenthood intentions impelled them each into an "individual and shared" journey of reflection. Revisiting their professional and personal values, each had to resolve their love of and commitment to one another with differing future visions. For Natalie, this meant reassessing the meaning of marriage and family and genuinely contemplating the possibility of a childfree future. Despite finding a surprising sense of "freedom" in contemplating life without children, Natalie continued to hope for a future wherein she and Bill would share their love for one another with a child.

Bill's journey involved an emerging "softness" to the possibility of his beloved career *and* personal aspirations co-existing. Speaking of this evolution, Bill described a "moment of epiphany" with a friend's young child as the catalyst for his new found "openness" to fatherhood. Sensing "pure love" from this child, Bill shifted in his perceptions of parenthood from its costs to its many potential gains. These quiet, inner journeys culminated into a shared experience of asserting the "real probability" of a future with parenthood to friends, family, and to one another.

Natalie and Bill described their experience of decision-making as follows: "It was an exploratory, very aware process for us…It was a balance of coming

together and doing our own work. Of the individual and the relationship. It was a conscious evolution toward readiness." They were actively pursuing a pregnancy at the time of the interview.

Faith and Sylvester. Faith, 32 years old, and Sylvester, 34 years old, have been together for eight years and have been married for the past six years. Faith, a preschool teacher, completed an undergraduate degree in English literature. She also holds a certificate in early childhood care. Sylvester earned an undergraduate degree, majoring in Psychology, and is currently employed in an administrative position at a local college.

Both Faith and Sylvester recalled the "kid issue" as having been a source of significant contention over the course of their relationship. Faith described her position as one of having always wanted children. Recognizing the need to secure their respective careers and pay down student loans, Faith looked forward to parenthood "some time in the future." Sylvester, on the other hand, described his initial position on parenthood as one of ambivalence. Perceiving himself as a "free spirit," Sylvester struggled to adjust to the "whirl wind" of married life. He initially looked upon the predictable and normative course of "marriage, kids, a career, purchasing some property, and staying in the same city" as a "track that I saw in the distance that I didn't want to be on." Sylvester implicated his own difficult upbringing as contributing to his reluctance to pursue parenthood. Having been raised in relative poverty in a single parent home, Sylvester spoke of lacking a map or positive vision of parenthood. Fears of not making the grade as a father and waiting for a "perfect time" that would never arrive, coupled with his

desire to pursue worldly experiences, fueled Sylvester's reluctance to pursue parenthood. Faith and Sylvester's initially discrepant parenthood needs and future visions imparted distress into their otherwise very happy and stable marriage.

For this couple, their experience of parenthood decision-making was constitutive of both a personal and shared path. Regarding the former, Faith's commitment to and love of her husband underlay her efforts to better understand and empathize with his reluctance to pursue parenthood. This, combined with Faith's resolve to "back off," afforded Sylvester the time and space he needed to work through his own fears and doubts about parenthood. In terms of the latter, Sylvester embarked on a "journey of the mind" that involved confronting and resolving his fears about parenthood, and assuming a more flexible, positive view of the potential gains thereof. Sensing Sylvester's changing perceptions and his emergent willingness to take the leap of faith into the unknown, Faith spoke of her own readiness as having been fortified and enhanced by her husband's "genuine enthusiasm" for parenthood. Both Faith and Sylvester felt that their marriage is stronger for having worked through and endured the challenge of parenthood decision-making. They also felt that their slow, deliberate, and often agonizing path toward becoming parents increased their appreciation for the imminent arrival of their first child. Six months pregnant at the time of the interview, Faith and her husband described their experience of parenthood decision-making as a "long and winding road."

Kate and Leon. Kate, 31 years old, and Leon, 36 years old, immigrated to Canada from China five years ago. Having met at a Chinese university, Kate and Leon dated for two years and married in 1993. At university, Kate pursued undergraduate study in teaching and Leon earned a Masters degree in Computer Science. Residing in China in the first two years following their marriage, Kate worked as a Chinese teacher while Leon worked as a civil engineer. Both spoke of the Chinese "cultural expectation" that all married couples have a child. Reflecting on their aspirations of "wanting more" for themselves than the difficult conditions in China would afford, Kate and Leon rejected pronatalist social norms in favor of seeking career and financial advancement. Kate further recalled having little desire for a child at this time: "I didn't think I liked children at all." Leon described his initial position on parenthood as uncertain, as he set his sights on establishing a secure future for his wife and family.

Relocating to Canada in 1995, Leon assumed a position managing the computer software system of a major grocery chain. Kate, lacking the qualifications to teach school in Canada, returned to school to study computers at a local college. Although Kate remained ambivalent about motherhood, Leon's desire and sense of readiness for parenthood increased as he advanced professionally and financially. With a secure foundation in place, Leon looked to parenthood as offering family continuity and the sense of purpose in life so integral in his culture. Open to a future with or without children, Kate agreed to pursue a first pregnancy and was seven months pregnant at the time of the interview. Although Kate and Leon spoke of looking forward to the birth of their

first child, they also noted their anticipation of the profound and potentially difficult changes that would accompany parenthood. Like the other participants in this study, this couple spoke of having deliberately and consciously accepted these challenges as the scales tipped in favor of the many gains of parenthood.

Margaret and Gabriel. Margaret, 31 years old, and Gabriel, 36 years old, have been together for 12 years. Married three years ago, they began actively deliberating about whether to have a child or not two years ago. At the time of the interview, Margaret was seven months pregnant with their first child.

Originally from Holland, Margaret and Gabriel both earned a Masters degree in Economic and Social History. Margaret completed a degree in Industrial Relations in England thereafter. Having spent much of their early adulthood traveling and working in Europe and Asia, Margaret and Gabriel particularly enjoyed their seven years working in Hong Kong. There, Margaret managed the Dutch Chamber of Commerce while Gabriel pursued a career in investment banking. With lucrative salaries and a large social circle of fellow expatriates, they reveled in the freedoms of a childfree lifestyle. Both Margaret and Gabriel recalled looking upon the perceived burden and restrictions of parenthood with considerable foreboding during the first ten years of their relationship. Parenthood existed as a remote "…later, very later" possibility that neither saw as an "attractive option."

Margaret and Gabriel experienced a shift in their perceptions of parenthood, beginning about three years ago. Witnessing the positive parenting experiences of family and friends, and sensing their own growing maturity as

individuals and as a couple, they experienced an emerging openness to the potential gains of parenthood. These insights, combined with concerns over Gabriel's advancing age and a sense of the "limits" of a childfree lifestyle, eventually propelled the couple toward the active pursuit of a pregnancy. They described their experience of parenthood decision-making as one of "increment steps to readiness," and, having settled in Canada two years ago, looked forward with eager anticipation to the birth of their first child.

Renee and Charlie. Renee, 31 years old, and Charlie, 32 years old, dated for seven years before their marriage four years ago. Renee, a self-employed fitness trainer and lifestyle coordinator, initially viewed parenthood with considerable foreboding. Perceiving the "sacrifices" and "hassles" of parenthood to outweigh the potential gains, Renee looked forward to the freedoms and flexibility of hers and Charlie's very active childfree lifestyle. Although Charlie also enjoyed the self-indulgences—namely, extreme recreational pursuits, and travel and work abroad—that childlessness afforded, he spoke of initially having been "open to life with or without a kid."

Renee and Charlie began actively contemplating whether to have a child or not about one year ago, and were expecting the birth of their first child within two months of the time of the interview. Both spoke of Renee's change in perspective as being the catalyst for their efforts to try to start a family. Renee noted an "inner shift" in her perception of parenthood, from the losses and trials of bearing and rearing a child to the potential personal and interpersonal benefits of parenthood. This shift in perception, coupled with a conscious realignment of

professional and personal priorities, afforded a new view and subsequent enthusiasm about the prospects of becoming a parent. Recognizing his wife's more "apprehensive" nature than his own, Charlie supported Renee's private journey toward readiness with understanding and patience. Shared in the journey was a sense of maturity and stability in their marriage, and a mutual acknowledgement and respect of one another's ability to parent. Firm in their own resolve to become a parent, and in one another's parenting abilities and commitment to the relationship, Renee and Charlie joyously anticipated the arrival of their first born.

Susan and Sam. Susan, a 36 year old grocery clerk, and Sam, a 32 year old computer software engineer, have been together for seven years. They were married one year ago. Susan was eight months pregnant at the time of the interview. Susan spoke of her initial and current position on parenthood as unchanged. She had always wanted to have children and looked forward to sharing parenthood with Sam. Sam, on the other hand, described his initial stance as ambivalent at best. He perceived parenthood to be fraught with sacrifice, restriction, and hassle. After completing an undergraduate degree in Computer Science, Sam invested his time, energy, and money into various business ventures and looked forward to a future of professional success and childless freedoms. Despite being aware of one another's position on parenthood, Susan and Sam pursued their relationship in the hopes that they would eventually find "common ground" regarding whether and when to have a child. Feeling that they were a

"good fit" in all other areas of their relationship, Susan and Sam "avoided" the "baby question" for the first five years of their relationship.

Susan recalled having begun seriously contemplating her future with Sam—and with or without children—about two years ago. Still convicted in her desire to try to start a family, Susan was compelled to revisit and rework her values and personal priorities. For Susan, her journey involved conceding to Sam's need for "more time" as an extension of her love of and commitment to the relationship. Not wanting to "burst the bubble" of their otherwise loving marriage, Susan worked to understand and accept Sam's continued hesitancy just as she continued to quietly assert her own desires. For his part, Sam described his initial experience as one of "selfish procrastination." Embarking on his own journey, Sam too was confronted with a re-examination and realignment of his values. Valuing his marriage above all else, Sam endeavored to consciously and deliberately adopt a more flexible view of parenthood wherein his professional aspirations and fatherhood could harmoniously co-exist. Having finally found their coveted common ground, both Susan and Sam looked forward to the birth of their first child with enthusiasm and an enhanced sense of commitment to one another.

Common Themes

Six common themes emerged from participants' accounts of their experiences in deciding if, and when, to try to start a family. These themes were confirmed and refined based on feedback from validation interviews with participants. The participants typically articulated their decision-making

experiences in a loosely chronological order, culminating in their sense of readiness and excitement for parenthood and trust in their relationships. While the discussion to follow endeavors to parallel participants' experiences, it is important to note that this presentation does not imply—nor did participants endorse—a linear or temporal sequence of events. Rather, participants described a circularity in their decision-making experiences, that is, revisiting, reengaging, and oscillating between thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and understandings represented in various themes. For example, just as participants described having come to a sense of readiness for parenthood, they continued to feel intensely the potential sacrifices that parenthood would impart into their lives and relationships. The six themes extracted from participants' accounts, then, reveal the essence of what was described as complex, multi-faceted, and meaning-laden experience. The six themes that emerged in this phenomenological investigation are as follows:

1. A Sense of the Costs of Parenthood

2. A Sense of Fear

3. Changing Perceptions from the Costs to the Gains of Parenthood

4. An Emerging Sense of Readiness for Parenthood

5. A Sense of Excitement and Curiosity

6. A Sense of Faith in the Relationship

These themes, corroborated by quotations from participants, are elaborated on in the section to follow.

A Sense of the Costs of Parenthood. A sense of the many costs of parenthood emerged as a common theme across participants' accounts of parenthood decision-making. Couples initially perceived parenthood as a loss of personal and professional freedom, and at odds with their expressed values of autonomy, risk-taking, and worldly adventure. Almost all of the couples in this study identified themselves and their partners as "trailblazers" whose rejection of social conventions permitted the pursuit of non-traditional careers, leisure activities, and lifestyle choices. Many couples had histories of traveling and working abroad, and continued to hold non-traditional, often self-employed jobs in Canada. Most couples shared non-traditional relationships as well, with each contributing equally to household labor and finances. Participants understood these choices as reflecting a posture of rebellion—a posture informed by passionately held values of personal freedom and autonomy. Although most participants liked children and many devoted considerable time and energy to relationships with young relatives, their initial focus was on the significant and irrevocable costs that parenthood would impart in their lives and relationships. Couples expressed the perceived costs of parenthood with terms such as "sacrifice," "sense of being trapped," "living in a prison," and "restriction on my freedom."

The couples' perceptions of the costs of parenthood were articulated as losses in terms of professional opportunity, worldly experience, leisure activity, and relationship intimacy. Regarding the former, both women and men initially equated parenthood with a loss of career options. The specific nature of the loss,

however, was conceived of differently by women and men. The women in the study prided themselves on their professional achievements and derived great satisfaction from their respective careers. Many had fought to establish themselves in predominantly male-dominated professions or had built small business ventures. Parenthood was initially construed as an untenable threat to their career mobility and advancement, and to their financial independence. These women recognized the competing and seemingly irreconcilable demands that full careers and motherhood would impart in their lives. Unable to envision a resolution to these competing demands, the topic of starting a family met with "perpetual postponement." In the words of one woman who owned a small event management company:

> There were always issues regarding my career. That I always needed another year. I'd think, I need another two years. I've got my own business now. I need another year to get established. But then what ended up happening was that another year went by, and another year goes by, and another year goes by.

For other women, concerns about adverse reactions from colleagues and the concomitant possibility of losing their place in the professional hierarchy superceded any initial desire to start a family. The professional risks these women felt they would assume in becoming mothers were experienced as too significant a price to pay after years of building and establishing a credible professional identity. In one woman's case, the anticipated professional costs of parenthood loomed dauntingly in her mind:

With regard to my work and career, there's a lot of old thinking. Old

ways of thinking like, if you're not at the office then you're not

working...The old way of thinking is that we need you here! You're the

leader. So we need you here. I'd have to show them that I could do it all.

In addition to the perceived threat to professional advancement,

parenthood was initially construed as a loss of financial independence by many

women in this study. They expressed this cost as a potential loss of personal

choice and autonomy over how finances were allocated. After years of financial

independence, the prospect of relying on their partners' incomes during maternity

leaves was experienced as a frightening loss of control. One small business

owner recalled considering the loss of financial self-sufficiency and the possible

shifts in lifestyle that parenthood would impart: "Negative Nelly here. I worried

about the fact that I'm not going to be able to take any contracts of my own. And

I wondered how I'd deal with this...If I rely more on Tony's work and it's not

longer there, that's a very scary thing." This theme of the professional costs of

parenthood was intensely felt by almost all of the women in the study. Initially,

the costs of motherhood were perceived to outweigh any gains to having a child.

Although no women in the study ruled out having children, most felt uncertain at

best and hopeless at worst, as to how professional and family demands could be

balanced.

Men in this study similarly recalled a focus on professional sacrifice when

first considering parenthood. However, whereas women perceived the greatest

professional costs of parenthood in terms of career advancement and financial

independence, the men experienced more intensely the costs to their professional freedom. Many male participants identified themselves as "risk-takers", having pursued a wide variety of non-conventional career paths. Being childfree was understood as essential to their risky, often financially unstable career pursuits. One male participant described his initial childfree posture as follows:

> It was a lot about freedom. I know that taking care of kids can be a lot of work. And you wonder why people would do it, on purpose. And I guess I always thought I was going to be a millionaire or broke. I was going to do that and you can't do that once you have a kid. You're priorities all change. You have to really shift everything to the family, if not entirely to the child. So it was a sacrifice I wasn't willing to make.

Other men described their initial view of parenthood as "entrapment", and spoke of their "trepidation" regarding the commitment and subsequent restriction that a child would impart in their professional lives. In the words of one man whose wife desired to start a family immediately after their marriage, "I had a sense of being trapped. Trapped. It sounds like a really negative word. But on the outside looking in, being in a situation with a baby on the way and owning a place and having a set career did look trapped to me."

In some cases, the pursuit of non-conventional professional goals supplanted the establishment of a lifestyle thought necessary for childrearing. For example, in speaking about his acting career, one man revealed what he initially viewed as irreconcilable tensions between his career choice and fatherhood:

I like children but at the time I certainly believed that I wouldn't make a very good parent. Primarily because I was a lot more career minded and focused. And the nature of my chosen career wasn't very stable for bringing up children in terms of financial stability as well as a time commitment. I can be off on a series and gone for eight months straight. I recognized that wasn't very fair.

Other men set "professional milestones," standards for professional achievement that *had* to be met before starting a family. As said by one entrepreneur: "I'd always had stereotypes that in order to make things work, to be successful, you have to have certain things—intangibles and tangibles—like how well established you are in your career." Another man described how his initial focus on career and advancing his and his spouse's lifestyle violated powerful cultural imperatives:

> In China, every couple is expected to have children. It is just normal to get married and then have children. In China...of the three biggest sins you can commit to your parents, the biggest one is to not have a child...My feelings though about having children were not very strong. I was busy building a future for myself and my family. China was going through a reform. The window was open. We saw foreign countries were the standard of living was so much higher. I knew I would be able to get into one of those countries. So, at this time, we couldn't think of having a child. We needed to work hard to build a future for ourselves.

Despite meeting with many career successes, however, participants continued to readjust their professional goals such that the decision of whether to have a child or not remained an elusive, "sometime later" topic. In short, the men in this study were initially unable to reconcile their professional goals with the standards and values that they held for parenthood. Intensely felt was the "good provider" stereotype for fatherhood. Equally salient was the participants' realization of their valuing of professional choice and autonomy, and the importance thereof to their personal happiness. As with the women in this study, this tension between professional goals and the realities of parenthood initially led to postponement of the decision of whether to have children.

A second aspect of the costs of parenthood expressed by participants was the potential loss of worldly experiences. Both men and women strongly identified with an "adventurers' spirit," and perceived a valuing of travel and worldly experience as central to their self-concepts. Four couples in the study had worked for extended periods of time overseas, and all but one couple traveled abroad regularly. As with their pursuits of non-conventional careers, participants were unable to resolve a commitment to worldly experiences and to a young family. For example, a financial consultant who lived with his spouse in Hong Kong for seven years described his initial thoughts about parenthood as follows:

> Well, initially I viewed parenthood as a restriction. I saw it as a restriction
> on my freedom to do things in a way I thought they should be done, career
> wise and travel wise. That was my initial thought. You can be a
> globetrotter, but a child is extra weight. It's challenging as is. Having to

carry kids around the world is not going to make it a lot easier. So that was my early feeling. That parenthood would be a restriction.

His spouse similarly shared her initial passion for travel and adventure. She also perceived the costs of parenthood to outweigh the benefits:

> I did like kids but I thought this is not for me. I was young. I was in university. I felt that my whole life was so exciting. And there were so many more things to do. I thought, Holland is not the only place in the world. I wanted to see so much. Children were just not an attractive option at all.

Importantly, couples shared and reinforced for one another this worldly perspective, and many dismissed more conventional lifestyle choices as common and inferior. Parenthood was for some bowing out to social norms against which they had so vehemently railed. Spouses' shared values fortified their resolve against pronatalist norms—often felt most strongly in relation to their peers' decisions to start families of their own. One woman, working overseas with a close knit group of expatriates, recalled her own and her husband's reactions to a close friend's pregnancy announcement: "I still remember vividly…my boss told me, 'Great news! My wife is pregnant!' And I was like, 'God, why!'. I even asked him, 'Why, Oliver? You are having such fun. Your wife has plans and things she wants to do!' My initial reaction was just, how could you do this!" Others, likening themselves to rebels, recalled having had a "different plan" and expressed great disdain for the "you get married, you have kids, you raise your kids" life course.

One woman, speaking of her early impressions about parenthood, said:

I think we had a different plan. I think we talked about traveling

more...Just the idea, just our lifestyle was different. Where we could take

off and do whatever and having that freedom...we thought, if we had a kid

we could never do that. I think it was just the whole lifestyle. There was

no room for kids.

As with this participant, most couples recalled fondly and vividly their childfree

days and easily articulated the initial sense of restriction to, and loss of, worldly

experience that parenthood was seen to impose.

A related aspect of participants' sense of the costs of parenthood was their

perception of restricted recreational and leisure activity and time. Couples

described themselves as working hard and playing hard, a self-perception that felt

incongruent with the demands of parenthood. Many participants reveled in

extreme outdoor pursuits, and enjoyed time-consuming hobbies and an active

social life. Friends' choices to begin a family were sometimes met with feelings

of "betrayal" and were experienced as challenges to participants' ambivalence

regarding having children. As articulated by a male participant who worked

overseas for a number of years: "We had this big group. A great group there. We

were all the same age. We were all from Europe. We were all making money.

Having a great time. And all of the sudden, people started having kids. We

thought, why? Why!"

Although all couples in the study recognized, and to differing degrees

focused on, the lifestyle restrictions parenthood would impose, many participants

also recalled engaging in a process of quiet rationalization to support their negative perceptions of parenthood. This rationalization involved filtering out of the positive aspects of parenthood—for example, the emotional bond shared with a child or the personal growth realized through parenting—and a selective focus on the costs to their lifestyles of having children.

Participants also understood their initial uncertainty regarding parenthood to reflect fears concerning a loss of relationship intimacy. Many men and women perceived their relationships to be exceptionally strong and initially associated parenthood with the loss of emotional and physical closeness. One woman, whose decision to finally have a child came about after ten years of a committed childfree position, said of her initial fears:

> I've often heard, even recently, of couples who have had children and there's no sex. They don't see each other. The husband's jealous because the wife is with the baby all the time and he's completely left out of the picture. I am just not interested in that happening to us…That is a real fear of mine.

In some cases, participants spoke with deep conviction about their loyalty to their spouse and marriage and their commitment to preserving the relationship as paramount even as they anticipated the arrival of a first child. One woman expressed her views on relationships and parenthood as follows: "I know some people do get married to have children. I know that some people's love for their children surpasses their marital partnership. I may be naïve, but this is the primary bond in my life." This initial focus on the potential loss of relationship

intimacy made for hesitancy, and sometimes perpetual postponement, regarding the decision to have a child.

To summarize, a focus on the costs of parenthood marked couples' initial considerations of whether to start a family or remain childfree. Participants recalled a sense of "being trapped," of "restriction," and of "trepidation," as they considered potential professional, personal, and relationship costs of parenthood. Particular to women in the study were concerns over the loss of opportunities for professional advancement and financial independence, especially during the early years of motherhood. Men experienced the perceived loss to professional risk-taking as the most significant cost of parenthood. The men and women in this study also focused on restrictions to travel opportunities, recreational pursuits, and relationship intimacy when considering parenthood. Informing participants' selective focus on the negative consequences of having children were the values of personal freedom and independence from social conventions. Couples described themselves as rebels and trailblazers whose thirst for personal and professional adventure was perceived as incongruent with the realities and demands of parenthood. Confronted with such irreconcilable differences, almost all of the men and women in this study focused selectively on the perceived costs of having a child. So intensely felt were the costs of parenthood that most couples avoided or postponed serious discussions about having children, and rather reinforced, through privately shared slights against new parents or internal justifications, their continued ambivalence regarding parenthood.

A Sense of Fear. The experience of fear was described across participants' accounts of parenthood decision-making. Components of this sense of fear included fear of not measuring up to the challenges of parenthood and fear of the risks of pregnancy and childrearing. Regarding the former, both men and women in this study articulated rigid and arguably excessive standards for parenthood. These standards involved tangible and intangible criteria, for example, having a home in a nice neighborhood with a large yard and having time and money to devote to raising a young family. These "good parent" ideals, viewed as incompatible with the demands of participants' personal and professional pursuits, initially absolved participants of the burden of parenthood decision-making. At an impasse in their journey, participants deferred decision-making until "that sometime later." Also intensely felt by many female participants was fear surrounding the risks of pregnancy and childbearing. Participants vividly recalled "warnings" received from others regarding the risks, pain, and prolonged recovery involved in childbearing. Many relayed stories of peers or colleagues who had experienced difficult pregnancies or birthing complications. These experiences made more salient for participants the fact that "the clock was ticking." These perceived risks, and the concomitant fear that they engendered in the men and women in this study, pushed couples toward active engagement of the parenthood question. Equally powerful, however, were couples' fears of not well meeting the task of parenthood. Fearful of becoming a parent and fearful of waiting too long to do so, participants met with "turmoil,"

"frustration," and ultimately "paralysis," in their experience of parenthood decision-making.

Underlying the experience of fear for many of the participants were deep convictions about what constitutes a good parent and concerns about not measuring up to one's own expectations thereof. Most profoundly valued by these men and women was the "selfless ideal" of parenthood. That is, parenthood was initially construed as a selfless act that requires total and unwavering commitment on the part of both parents. Participants described tangible and intangible resources deemed essential for parenthood. In terms of the former, most men and women shared a clear and narrow view of the environment in which to most ideally raise a child. One woman, initially committed to a childfree lifestyle, said this of her own and her spouse's early ideals for parenthood:

> We had ideas, like if you're going to have a kid you've got to have the
>
> house, and white picket fence, the big yard, the playground and school
>
> nearby…I think we had that romantic vision of childhood, of growing up,
>
> of what it should be.

Living in a city apartment and working long hours to build a managerial career, this woman's romantic vision was at odds with the realities of hers and her spouse's busy, urban lifestyle. Hence, parenthood decision-making met with a prolonged and passive avoidance.

For some, wanting and expecting "something more" than they had known as children, combined with a paralyzing fear of failing the mark. One Chinese couple recalled having postponed the decision of whether to have a child or not

until they were more financially stable. Longing for a better life for themselves and their children than they had known growing up in China, they passively avoided the baby question by setting increasingly ambitious professional and financial benchmarks. Of these standards for parenthood, the husband stated:

> Our perspective was definitely different. For others in China, they may have been in the same situation as we were but they were still very happy to have a child. We definitely expected more. We felt we needed to have our own house for the baby. If we had a child, we wanted a good education. We would want to send her to a good school and to be able to afford high tuition fees for a private school. We didn't settle with just bringing a baby into the world. To just grow up average.

Sensing the "great responsibility" and subsequently felt "burden and fear" that parenthood would impart in his and his wife's lives, this participant chose to postpone parenthood in favor of personal and professional advancement—a course much at odds with the values and traditions espoused by his culture.

Other participants had strong beliefs about the personal qualities deemed necessary to parent. As with standards for the physical environment in which to raise children, these intangible ideals were understood as both essential and impossibly realized given participants' initial lifestyle choices. One male participant spoke of his and his wife's high standards for parenthood as follows:

> I think for both of us the importance that we put on children is very high because we see so many cases where kids are neglected or turn out in a certain way because they're not brought up properly. I think for me, and

for both of us, that it was important for us to be able to be in a position where we could afford the time and where we had the personal maturity, to make sure we were good parents and we hopefully would bring a good, productive citizen into society.

Others similarly articulated parenting ideals of patience, nurturance, and caring. One female participant noted the way in which her self-view differed from her view of maternal qualities: "I've never thought of myself as maternal. I don't feel this instinct like some women do, you know, to be soft and caring and doting. I think I actually thought of kids as a bit of a nuisance. I couldn't imagine *me* as a mom." Uncertain as to whether they could consistently and willingly live up to their espoused ideals, participants' fears of not having the emotional resources needed to parent manifest as a "disabling" force in their experience of deciding whether to have a child or remain childfree.

In contrast to the selfless ideal of parenthood, investments in personal, relationship, and career advancement were construed as selfish pursuits realized only through the unencumbered liberties of childlessness. Speaking of his acting career, and initial fear of failing his own ideals of fatherhood, one man said:

> Actors are notoriously selfish. Basically that's what it comes down to. I was selfish in the regard that I wouldn't want to compromise my career, but I also realized that if you're going to have children it's a huge commit-ment. The way I would like to do it, well I might not be able to live up to my ideal of what a good father should be.

Interestingly, this man's spouse expressed strong belief in her husband's ability to parent and did not view his commitment to acting as selfish nor as incongruent with the demands of fatherhood.

Indeed many participants recognized their own and their spouses' standards for parenthood as excessively high or, in the words of one woman, "perfectionistic." For some, these excessively high standards were reflective of their commitment to achievement and excellence in all areas of their lives. One participant said of her husband's initial reluctance to consider fatherhood:

> It's important to make the point that whether [he] chooses a career, or a partnership in marriage, or to be a parent, he sets the bar very high. And if he doesn't feel that he can do it as well as he would want to do it, then he's really hesitant to do it. [He] knew parenthood and what it looked like. If he was ever going to step into the role as father, he wanted to know he could fill those shoes well.

Setting the bar high in all their personal and professional endeavors, many participants looked to parenthood as an overwhelming challenge with little room for human failing. Fearful of not making the grade, parenthood was considered with trepidation at best.

For some, a related aspect of the fear of not measuring up to the task of parenthood was a fear of replicating the mistakes made by their own parents. Three participants described how a difficult childhood had contributed to their uncertainties about parenthood. These early experiences had both robbed them of positive models from which to envision their own families, and had endowed

them with personal insecurities about their capacity to parent. For example, one man emotionally recalled growing up in a single parent home with few emotional or material resources. His journey in coming to terms with this past had necessarily supplanted any serious consideration of becoming a father himself:

> There's a lot of personal issues with the way I was raised and my upbringing. And I can safely say that I have used that model for a model of how I would not want to raise my own children...not having a positive model—rather I'm looking at it as a negative model—not really a role model of a family that I can relate to. All of those question marks and hesitancy about what my family would look like, what my children would look like, what our family would look like. They all still exist. I think that I've worked myself to a point where I have confidence in how I will be as a father and how we'll be as a family. But I wasn't ready at that time and I knew I wasn't ready. And I did a lot of soul searching on that.

One woman similarly shared her trials growing up with a perfectionistic father and her fears that she would repeat his demanding and controlling ways:

> I think in the back of my mind I didn't want a child to have to go through what I'd gone through as a kid. I just wasn't a happy kid. As a kid, well, my dad is a super-perfectionistic kind of guy and everything has to be perfect and I just didn't like that. Everything had to be perfect. I just wasn't a happy kid. And maybe I was just content not to have another unhappy kid come into the world.

For these men and women, initial mistrust of their abilities to forge new territory as parents and the concomitant fear of submitting a child to the challenges they had endured while young, manifest in reluctance to actively engage in parenthood decision-making. Postponing the decision to have a child or remain childfree afforded these participants the time and space needed to move beyond their own childhood experiences to create a different, more positive view of parenthood and their ability to realize this vision.

Even those who had a map from which to guide their experience as parents expressed anxiety over their competence and suitability for raising a child in "today's world." Two couples in particular, viewed the present challenges of childrearing as very different from that which their own parents had confronted. Despite having had excellent role models, these men and women perceived their parents' experiences to be marginally relevant to the trials of parenting today. One woman, in speaking about the changes to society that had occurred since her own childhood, expressed her fears as follows:

> I had been really quite adamant about the fact that sure, people have decided to do this [parenting] before, but now not only is this a really important decision to bring another life into this world, but the world's really different now. And I guess for me, I don't know if I'm ready to bring a child into the world the way it is. I'd be so afraid of sending them to school, of letting them out of my sight.

For these men and women, initial consideration of having children was overshadowed by fears of raising a child and the risks and trials therein.

In relaying their fears of not meeting the mark as parents, participants recalled feeling an overwhelming lack of readiness for the challenges of parenthood. Envisioning a "right time", wherein their initial concerns would be remedied or at least diminished, most participants avoided or only superficially engaged the "baby question" at this time. Akin to waiting for the stars to align, participants postponed decision-making in favor of an improbable "sometime later," an imagined period of personal, interpersonal, professional, and financial readiness. In retrospect, however, participants recognized this deferment as an abdication of responsibility for making a decision about whether or not to have a child. For example, one man described the torment he felt as he perpetually avoided the topic despite his wife's ardent desire to begin a family:

> I would rather not have talked about it at all. But occasionally it would boil over. Where [she] would go, for whatever reason one night, "Okay, what's going on?" And I'm reporting back, and I haven't anything to report. I'm still on assignment. I haven't uncovered anything. And I felt cornered, then just guilty. Like I was slacking off on my assignment. And I'd get angry with myself. I mean, what was really holding me back? Sometimes I was able to illustrate things, like I haven't got a full-time job. I'm working contracts. She'd go, "Fine. Once you get a full-time job, we'll move on it." And then I'd get a full-time job and then it was more intangibles. Like, it just doesn't feel right now...I saw possibilities in the distance, but it was a "later" that always exists. "Later" wasn't then.

Waiting for the "right time" proved for this man and many other participants a delay tactic that warded off the pronatalist agendas of family and friends and that afforded participants respite from the weightiness and irrevocable nature of parenthood decision-making.

Another aspect of the sense of fear was participants' fear of the risks of childbearing. This fear imparted opposing pressures. On the one hand, participants' concerns over the difficulties and complications that might arise during pregnancy and birthing manifest, for some, in a stalling or hesitancy in their parenthood decision-making. On the other hand, worry about assuming a high risk, late-age pregnancy pushed many couples toward a more immediate consideration of parenthood than they might otherwise have chosen.

The "biological time clock" was felt saliently by both men and women in this study. A sense of urgency, described variously as "Do or die," "The clock was ticking," or "Now or never" by two men and one woman respectively, underlay the sense of fear couples brought to the decision. For men, concern was often expressed over their wives' increasing age. As well, many men shared concerns over their increasing age and their fitness for parenthood as an older father. Women's fears were felt more specifically in regard to conceiving and bearing a child.

One woman spoke of the numerous "warnings" she was given regarding late birthtiming and the impact that these warnings had on hers and her husband's decision to try to get pregnant earlier that they would otherwise have planned:

You start to hear scary stories from people who are past thirty-five. I had quite a few people tell me, "If that's what you want, you shouldn't wait cause you don't know what's going to happen." And I have to say that that did—even though it's this magical number pulled out of the air— make me think that I had to make a decision…I'm not a risk-taker. And I'm not the kind of person that can shake stories like that off and walk away. They would stick, the stories I was hearing and the difficulties some women were having. I mean, you never get tested as to whether this is going to work or not. No one cares until you start trying.

Another participant, relaying her sister's struggle trying to get pregnant, noted her own "cautious" view of pregnancy:

My older sister, she went through this period in her life where she really wanted a baby. And she'd been on the pill for 20 years and went off, and had major problems and was not able to conceive. She just couldn't conceive. And I thought to myself, well, if it doesn't happen, you can't be devastated. You don't know what is going to happen. You really don't.

In short, considerable apprehension accompanied participants' consideration of pregnancy and childbearing. Almost all the men and women in this study felt, saliently, the push of increasing age and subsequent fear surrounding late-age parenthood. These same concerns, however, served to reinforce a "sometime later", "right time" approach to deciding if, and when, to have children.

In summary, the sense of fear, described variously as "paralyzing" and "disabling," surrounded couples' experiences of parenthood decision-making.

This fear manifest as anxiety over meeting preconceived standards for parenthood; of replicating the mistakes of their own parents; and of assuming the inherent risks of childbearing itself. Underlying these fears were deeply held convictions regarding the financial, material, and emotional resources necessary for parenting. Most men and women alike initially doubted their willingness and ability to live up to these expectations. In addition, almost all the women in the study and at least half of the men expressed concerns over the risks and shortcomings of parenting at an older age. These concerns facilitated engagement in decision-making around whether to start a family. However, fear of failing oneself and one's child made for an equally powerful, inhibiting force in participants' experience of parenthood decision-making. A later, "right time" was envisioned wherein these conflicting pressures would resolve themselves.

Changing Perceptions from the Costs to the Gains of Parenthood.
Changing perceptions from the costs to the gains of parenthood was a common theme in the stories of the participants in this study. Participants described this shift as a slow evolution of changed perceptions about parenthood—in particular, about the gains that parenthood would engender in their lives and relationships. Components of these perceived gains included a sense of personal growth; emotional intimacy with a child; pleasure in watching a child grow; and an enhanced sense of family and family continuity. Participants understood this shift as arising from several factors including: participants' perceptions of the parenthood experiences of significant others; an increased sense of personal and relationship maturity; fear of missing out; and the push of increasing age.

Participants reported that these factors prompted a shift in the frame from which they viewed parenthood. Emerging from this "evolving picture" was a more positive, enhancing, and flexible view of parenthood. These potential gains of parenthood were juxtaposed with participants' initially negative perceptions. Most participants described a shift in perspective from personal loss—for example, loss of personal autonomy and choice—to personal betterment. This shift afforded an emerging congruity between participants' ardently defended values of achievement and excellence, and parenthood. The newly perceived personal gains of parenthood began to supplant participants' initial sense of the sacrifices therein. Although most participants continued to consider the perceived costs of parenthood, this new vision served as a catalyst for couples' active engagement with, and reworking of, the meaning of marriage, family, and life. In the words of one male participant: "I remember coming to a place of thinking, okay, maybe I *could* do this. And that was such a first. I knew I had had a huge shift in my whole view…[Being a parent] moved from a possibility to an unspoken probability."

Many participants recalled the parenthood experiences of others—usually close peers or siblings—as having had a transformative and indelible impact on their own emerging views of parenthood. Challenging, and in many cases supplanting, participants' initially negative views of parenthood, these experiences offered a new perspective on the many gains that parenthood could engender in their lives, personally and interpersonally. Most intensely felt and vividly described by participants in this study was the recognition of the profound

personal growth that parenthood prompted in the lives of significant others.

Parenthood began to be seen as a vehicle, propelling the development of positive

and coveted personal qualities such as confidence, patience, and personal

maturity.

For example, one woman spoke of the marked positive change and growth

she observed in a close friend who had recently had her first child:

> For me, I think the real change…was my feelings regarding a close friend.
>
> She was always very insecure, very nervous about things. I could see her
>
> change. She was even changing during her pregnancy. And when she had
>
> the baby, she changed in a very, very good way. She was more secure.
>
> She was happier. She was also very dedicated to this baby. I thought,
>
> wow, look at what this baby has done for her! For the first time, I thought
>
> about also experiencing this. I saw that she had always been so insecure,
>
> and with the baby, she was so secure and had her own opinions. That
>
> really struck me as something.

Another participant, in relaying her admiration for a friend who was raising two

young boys, said this of her shifting impressions of parenthood:

> We'd always make jokes like so many people, making jokes that your life
>
> is over [when you have children]. But, really, I began realizing it's just a
>
> whole different chapter. You don't stop growing as a person. Becoming a
>
> parent is a huge part of what you become and what you experience.

Critical to the shifting perceptions from the costs to the potential gains of parenthood was participants' emerging awareness of the personal development and betterment potentially realized through parenthood.

The parenting experiences of significant others also offered participants an alternative to the "selfless ideal" that was the basis of their earlier focus on the personal costs of having a child. A more balanced view of the challenges and gains of parenthood was beginning to emerge. For example, one male participant said the following of his shifting perspective:

> One of the important things that changed for me...was that my father told me, "Having kids is not necessarily a restriction. You grow yourself. Yes, you will grow with age and education, but you grow further when you have a child." And I'd never looked at it that way. That is, that raising kids gives you more responsibility, but that you learn from your kids. You probably need this experience to carry on in life...I never realized this, that it is a two-way process, that you actually grow and learn from having a child.

The emerging awareness that parenthood would complement and perhaps better enable—rather than undermine—personal maturity and happiness, was critical in participants' decision-making journeys.

Indeed, others' experiences served to incite a reconstructing of participants' views of parenthood, as a vehicle through which the values of individuality and personal excellence could ideally be realized. For example, one

woman spoke of her developing awareness of the potential congruity between her "rebellious nature" and motherhood:

> I began to see parenthood like setting up a little challenge. Instead of just dismissing it as something I *could* do but I'm not going to, I started thinking I could just take it up and do this. I saw it like going and rebelling in a way. Of saying, I'm not going to do *just* what society thinks I should. I'm going to do it [parenthood] *better*. Just watch!

Many others also talked about their emerging appreciation for the ways in which parenthood could complement, and even enhance, their self-perception as "free spirits". Emerging was a view of parenthood as a challenge that could ideally utilize and further nurture the values of personal freedom, risk-taking, and personal growth and excellence with which the men and women in this study so passionately identified. Integral to this emerging congruency—and, specifically, to the preservation of their nonconventional values—was participants' consideration of ways in which they could parent "better" or "differently" from the masses. Speaking to their disdain for current parenting practice, many participants began to consider their ideals for parenthood as within reach and as complementary to, rather than undermining of, their personal and interpersonal growth. No longer at a hopeless impasse of irreconcilable differences, these self-proclaimed "trailblazers" envisioned, often for the first time, a meeting of their "different plans" *and* parenthood.

Another component of participants' changing perceptions from the costs to the gains of parenthood was an emerging appreciation for the emotional

intimacy shared between a parent and their child. Many participants talked about their growing appreciation for the closeness and companionship parent-child relationships offer. This significant gain was felt to slowly and subtly supplant participants' perceptions of the emotional stresses and burdens of parenting. Informing this shift was not only the experiences of significant others, but also participants' own felt sense of personal and relationship maturity. Participants recalled having slowly come to a place in their lives and relationships, of relative stability and security. Typically, these reflections did not prompt immediate thoughts of having a child. Rather they were understood as an essential foundation from which these men and women could comfortably and confidently consider the emotional demands of parenthood. One woman put it this way:

> It became not so much about what a child could do for us, but more what
>
> could I do for a baby. And also what we'd have to give as a unit. Yes,
>
> that's definitely another thing. I think that our relationship is very strong. I
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> think we felt we would have a lot to give and a lot to gain from a child.

In short, an emerging sense of personal and interpersonal maturity prompted a shift in participants' self-perceptions toward a growing appreciation of the many emotional resources that they could offer a child.

Furthermore, the experiences of significant others afforded participants a glimpse of the unique emotional bond shared between a parent and child. Particularly salient were the parenthood experiences of significant others who'd shared with participants, their initial uncertainty over whether to have a child.

One man described a peer's enthusiasm for fatherhood and the effect this had on his own staunchly reluctant position toward having children:

> Friends of ours have just had a kid late in life...And he wasn't really into it at first. But he said after the kid came, "I just love it. It's just great. It's excellent. Like no feeling you've ever experienced." He said he'd wish they done it sooner. So I thought maybe I will feel the same way. I loosened up.

These perceived gains in the lives of friends and family members who had made the transition to parenthood challenged what participants had previously construed as untenable costs to their lifestyles and relationships. In this man's case, a peer's experience provided an alternative, more enhancing frame on fatherhood than he had previously held. This new frame shifted the emphasis from loss to gain—from the emotional demands of parenting to its many emotional rewards.

A related aspect of participants' changing perceptions of the gains of parenthood was an emerging contemplation of the joys and pleasures of watching a child grow. Again, these gains were considered vis-à-vis the potential costs of raising a child. Common across all participants' accounts of their evolving perspective on parenthood was a shift from burden to fun, from work to play. Having observed the parenting experiences of others, participants began to fear that they might miss out on the joys of watching a child develop.

In particular, the men in this study recalled their emerging recognition of the potential fun that a child could bring to their lives. For many, this recognition

grew alongside an awareness of the limitations of their previously coveted childfree life. One man described this evolution in perspective as follows:

> Well, at first we just worked hard and played hard. But after a while you get sick of sitting at the bar, hearing the same stories over and over. We'd be home by eleven. Or we'd chose not to go out at all. Maybe we'd just have a nice dinner in and read. The scene just got tired. And I never would have expected that... And then people who do have children tell you how great it is and what a unique experience it is. Had they known it was so much fun they would have had kids earlier. This is what I heard at the time from a lot of people. And all of this changes your thinking a bit.

Other men similarly recalled dissolutionment with the very freedoms that they had so vehemently defended, as well as a growing curiosity about the potential pleasures of sharing favorite sports and hobbies with a young child. In the words of one man:

> We've got a lot of work to do in the yard here. And I think, can you imagine how much fun it would be to have a little child helping you. With a little spade and a little bucket. I'd think about this and think how great it would be. It would be great fun.

Women in this study also seemed to shift from a selective focus on the restrictions and losses of parenthood to an appreciation of the potential joys of raising a child. Primary to their experiences was an emerging sense of the pleasure of simply watching a child develop into his or her uniqueness. In recalling their decision-making journeys, several women noted that the fear of

missing out on this experience slowly came to supercede the anticipated personal

burdens and professional losses that parenthood could potentially impart in their

lives. One woman articulated the growing self-doubt she felt as she contemplated

a childfree future with a lucrative career and lifestyle:

> I started having dreams about having a baby…And then I'd drive down
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> the street and there'd be little kids playing in the front yard. I'd look at
>
> them and think, I don't have one of those. Then it started. Feeling like
>
> something was missing. I thought, do I really want to go through my
>
> whole life without having the experience of being a mother…And it kept
>
> popping up. And I'd dream about it. It felt okay in the dream. And again
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> I'd drive down the street coming home from work. I'd see these little kids
>
> playing out in the yard. And I'd look and think, I might be missing
>
> something here. I think I'm missing something here.

Confronted with the positive parenting experiences of friends and family

members, and their own fears of missing a "unique" and "unparalleled" life

experience, the scales began to tip and the gains of motherhood began to outweigh

the potential losses.

A final component of participants' shift in perceptions in terms of the

gains rather than the losses of parenthood, was an enhanced sense of family.

Most men and women in this study recognized, whether in others' experiences or

in an imagined future for themselves, the potential for parenthood to add to, rather

than diminish, their marriage and family unity. Although fears and concerns

regarding a loss of spousal intimacy remained, participants' emerging

contemplation of the relationship gains of parenthood informed an evolving, more positive frame on the impact that a child would have on their marriage. One man, initially committed to a childfree position, said this of his shifting perspective:

> The concept of family. I started thinking about two people contributing equally. About us. I started thinking about familyhood, if that's a word. Like the whole concept of three. Three people interconnecting. And how much learning I'd go through. From the child and from the experience.

Similarly, one woman who had enjoyed seven years of travel, fulfilling work, and a close marriage, described her evolving appreciation for the way in which a child could compliment and enhance the growth that she and her husband had already realized:

> I began to think about it as an extension of our team. Yes, our *team*. And I thought that it would be very healthy for the focus to be taken away from us. For our focus to go to a child and a family. I began to think of it as a very healthy change. I saw it less of a restriction and more of an extension of what we already had together.

For others, the importance of family continuity became particularly salient. This was especially the case for older participants who had postponed parenthood decision-making to realize their professional goals. Faced with increasing age and the prospect of a limited window of fertility, some participants entered a reflective period of quiet contemplation on their pasts and futures. In the words of one man:

> My story, I realized, was that I had struggled for the first half of my life to build a future for myself and my family. I felt I needed someone to leave this to...I thought about my father. And I felt that I had learned a lot from him on daily life, and I wanted to pass that on too.

This emerging sense of generativity was felt by many participants to enhance, rather than undermine, their sense of purpose and direction in life. Arriving at a place of relative personal and professional maturity, many participants recalled a kindled desire to share the fruits of their labors with the next generation.

Age and the ever present biological clock was perceived as a facilitating factor in most participants' contemplation and emerging appreciation of the potential gains of parenthood. Coupled with the experiences and advice of significant others, and their own growing sense of personal and relationship maturity, increasing age incited a more active deliberation of both the costs and gains of parenthood than many couples had previously engaged in. Participants' "sometime later" was fast approaching. A ticking clock, combined with fears of missing out on the potential gains of parenthood, propelled serious personal and interpersonal contemplation and dialogue about the very meaning of marriage, family, and life.

In summary, the men and women in this study experienced a shift in their perspectives from an emphasis on the losses to a growing appreciation of the potential gains of parenthood. Participants implicated several factors in facilitating this shift. These factors included their perceptions of significant others' parenting experiences; their growing sense of personal and relationship

maturity; their fear of missing out on the unique joys and pleasures of parenthood; and their concerns over increasing age and limited fertility potential. Participants' shifting perspectives on parenthood involved four areas of potential gain, namely: (a) personal growth; (b) shared emotional intimacy with a child; (c) the pleasure of contributing to and watching a child develop; and (d) an enhanced sense of family. Lingering dauntingly, however, were their perceptions of the costs of parenthood, as well as their sense of fear regarding their fitness for parenthood and the risks of childrearing. These dis-enabling factors in participants' decision-making experiences were juxtaposed with an emerging sense of the gains of parenthood. Participants understood this tension as critical in facilitating the process of revisiting and realigning personal and professional values, and ultimately in resolving the "baby question".

An Emerging Sense of Readiness for Parenthood. The theme of an emerging sense of readiness for parenthood was found in participants' stories of their parenthood decision-making experiences. Pushed by advancing age and the fear of missing out on the unique experience of parenthood, and pulled by their own evolving perceptions of parenthood, participants recalled an increased sense of comfort with the imminent probability of starting a family. Components of this theme included: (a) a conscious realignment of professional and personal priorities; (b) confronting and overcoming one's fears regarding parenthood; (c) acknowledgement that it is "never the right time"; (d) spouses' openness to each other's needs and level of readiness for parenthood, irrespective of their own; and (e) spouses' acknowledgement of their partners' ability to parent. Working

through these "individual and shared" struggles with "open minds and open hearts" was viewed as a significant, deliberate stepping stone toward a felt readiness for trying to start a family.

Participants recalled their shifting perceptions of parenthood, coupled with advancing age, as precipitating an active reworking of the meaning of personal, marital, and professional success, and a subsequent realignment of their personal and professional priorities. Participants understood this experience as distinct from a sense of shifting perceptions regarding parenthood. The latter was experienced as a more passive evolution of shifting views on parenthood, evoked by the experiences of significant others and by fears of missing out. The realignment of priorities, on the other hand, was understood by participants as an active and sometimes difficult reordering of personal and professional priorities to "make mental room" for parenthood. This realignment involved a conscious *choice* to embrace a more flexible, positive view of parenthood despite nagging fears and doubts. Participants stressed that their experience was one of choosing a "conscious and deliberate and very aware" path toward readiness for parenthood. For example, one woman said of hers and her spouse's emerging sense of readiness for parenthood:

> We entered into the contemplation of parenthood...as a very conscious choice. Shifting in our sense of readiness was very planned and conscious. It didn't happen *to* us. We *made* the evolution occur. It was a slow, aware process.

An important aspect of this realignment of priorities noted by all participants, was a sense of coming to a readiness for parenthood on their own. This meant reworking and realigning priorities in their own way and in their own time. To that end, many participants recalled an "inner journey" of "quiet resolve" to reorder their priorities in favor of a more flexible, life-enhancing view of parenthood. Participants' internal dialogues often involved efforts to rationalize the anticipated changes that would accompany parenthood and to consciously focus on the way in which a child would compliment, rather than jeopardize, coveted personal and professional values.

One woman recalled her "vision" for ideally balancing the demands of a managerial career and motherhood:

> I'd [imagine] the old fashion model, with a modern twist. One of the things I've always admired were parents that had their own careers, had children, *and* made time for their kids. They always made time for their kids. I admired that, but I never knew how it was done. And in truth, I still don't.

Despite not knowing *how* to replicate this ideal, this participant nevertheless looked to it as a beacon in her journey toward readiness for parenthood. Another female participant spoke of the way in which her "private dialogues" informed an emerging comfort with the co-existence of cherished personal pursuits and parenthood:

> Well, I tried to think, I don't know why life has to end just because there's a babe in arms. Why? I can still go for my jogs. I can just get a baby

jogger. If I have to go to the gym, they have childcare there. If we wanted
to go camping, we could just bring the baby. Big deal…Why would our
lives have to absolutely change? I don't see that we'd be sacrificing
much. There [was] a lot of rationalizing going on.

Many participants also reflected on their experience of coming to terms
with the realization that "you can't have it all." This acknowledgement was
understood as critical in moving them beyond the inertia of procrastination,
toward incorporating a "doable" vision of living, working, and parenting together.
For example, one woman talked about her experience in arriving at a reordering
of priorities, in her own time:

I'd always felt that I would want to make the decision without feeling
resentful. And I was at the point where I was willing to make what I think
are the sacrifices you have to make, because the child should be the most
important thing in your life. And three years before that, I wouldn't have
been at that place. Maybe I would have been resentful. I can say that I
made a conscious decision that this is what I was going to do…I came to
that place on my own.

Participants engaged in an active realignment of priorities such that parenthood
was viewed as a feasible and life-enhancing change. Confronted with the
pressures of advancing age and sensing their own evolving perceptions of
parenthood toward a more life-enhancing option, the men and women in this
study engaged in a deliberate reworking and realignment of their values and goals
to support their readiness for parenthood.

A second and related component of an emerging sense of readiness involved participants confronting and overcoming their fears regarding parenthood. The men and women in this study reflected on their experiences in coming to terms with lingering doubts about parenthood, and moving toward a felt readiness despite—rather than because of—the successful resolutions of these doubts. The scales having tipped in favor of having a child, more dauntingly felt was the fear of living with the regret and missed opportunity of not pursuing parenthood. Accustomed to considering and planning for every contingency in other aspects of their lives, the men and women recognized the need for a leap of faith into the irrevocable "unknown" of parenthood.

One man described his journey in coming to terms with the fear of commitment, and the concomitant angst he felt regarding his suitability for fatherhood:

> I realized eventually that the fear of commitment is never going to be completely eliminated. I had to live with it. And there was also being more logical about it, taking time and distance, and talking to others. It never really went away. It just became less of an issue. I was managing it, I guess. It's still gradual. I think it's going to be a lifelong thing…It's just working your way up the mountain. You reach a summit, or a point of no turning back. I knew I'd make it [as a father].

This man's experience reflects the journey of many participants. Acknowledging the need to "jump," irrespective of the presence of looming fears and insecurities

about parenthood, the men and women in this study spoke of "accepting" rather than resolving their fears and insecurities about parenthood.

Another man noted lingering concerns over the challenge of raising an Asian child in North American society:

> Our challenge was how to balance these two things [Asian and North American culture]. We talked about North American culture, combined with our Chinese culture that focuses so much on achievement. Well, maybe the two cultures would be a good mix. We hoped so. We didn't know.

Coming to terms with concerns regarding pregnancy and parenthood meant accepting these fears as a normal and inevitable aspect of the dauntingly irrevocable nature of parenthood. Resolving to take a "leap of faith" despite lingering doubts was an important stepping stone toward participants' felt readiness for parenthood, as their energy and focus was freed to embrace their "great expectations" about parenthood.

Acknowledgment that the "perfect time" for parenthood never arrives further freed participants to move toward a sense of readiness for parenthood. Underlying this private journey was an emerging awareness that the notion of the "right time" was idealistic, at best, and deluded, at worst. Participants recognized their indefinite wait as a convenient "avoidance strategy." This recognition, coupled with a "ticking clock", informed a new perspective. The sentiments expressed by this male participants were shared by many:

> I don't think I'll ever find the perfect time. Like people say, there's never a perfect time. And I realize that I've been through a lot of things in my life, and it was never the prefect time to go through those things either. It was just a matter of, okay, this is the time. We're the right age and I have enough off my plate that I was ready to take that jump.

Another man said of his journey toward readiness for parenthood:

> I started thinking, this is it. The "later" I've been referring to. This is it, now. Because I realized there was never going to be a right time. Ever. And it was important that I believed that.

Participants slowly came to terms with the fact that only a conscious *decision*—not time—would resolve the "baby question," and that they could never completely assuage their fears and doubts.

Another component of the theme of an emerging sense of readiness was participants' openness to the needs and level of readiness of their spouses. Few couples arrived at a sense of readiness for parenthood at exactly the same time. Harboring discrepant notions of "if" or "when" to have children, the men and women in this study spoke of an "individual and shared" journey that was viewed as an important, deliberate step toward "readiness" for trying to start a family. Regarding the former, participants reflected on the need to work through and resolve "internal inconsistencies" regarding the meaning of marriage, family, and parenthood in their own way and in their own time. Shared was an openness to one another's needs, desires, and level of readiness irrespective of their own. This openness was conceived of as an extension of the mutual respect and

understanding spouses shared in their relationships. Participants understood this openness as critical in affording the "time and space" each spouse needed to independently and willingly arrive at a place of readiness for parenthood.

For example, one man—whose wife wished to pursue a pregnancy sooner than he did—said the following of his experience in arriving at readiness himself:

> Not having pressure from my wife meant that, ahhh, I could breathe…And because I could breathe and because I really wanted to resolve this, well, I did a lot of work on my own, without anyone pushing me into the corner. That was really the catalyst. Feeling like I could work out my priorities and come to a point where I was ready. Without any pressure. I came to it on my own.

Honoring each other's respective level of readiness for parenthood often meant "pulling back" from blaming and judgments when differences did exist among spouse's parenthood intentions, desires, and plans. Many participants noted that, ironically, it was in affording one another time and space to individually assess and rework priorities that a meeting of the minds finally took place. In the words of one male participant:

> Well, for a period, neither one of us was getting what we wanted. She wasn't getting the child she wanted and I wasn't getting the space and the lack of pressure that I needed to work through things…So we did the right thing. We pulled back from it. We gave it a breather. And it was the right thing to do. Because then we both had open minds and open hearts.

By the time I did my work, I was really ready. She was ecstatic with my new found enthusiasm. We were right on the same page.

A female participant recalled how aggravation evolved into understanding, as she recognized her spouse's commitment to resolving longstanding issues and moving toward the "goal" of readiness for parenthood, himself:

It was easier for me to back off, knowing that he was really trying and working toward a goal. Before that, I wasn't really understanding that he was working toward any resolution. Once I saw that it was important to him and that he was working on his own issues, then I felt I could give him some time. Before that, I was just getting aggravated.

For other participants, engaging in open dialogues about what a future with children could and would look like—one that honored the respective needs of both spouses— supported an increased sense of readiness for parenthood. One man said this of his and his wife's discussions about parenthood:

Maybe we mapped out what it would look like in the first few years. I had a sense beyond the delivery room. Where we'd be living. Who'd be around. I had a sense of options. I recognized that with or without a baby, we're still mobile. We're still able to go anywhere. I think I needed that.

Though initially reluctant to entertain the prospect of parenthood, these discussions and the understanding proffered by his spouse served as a critical springboard from which he began to willingly and enthusiastically envision a "win-win."

For some spouses, differing levels of readiness prompted an agonizing examination and reworking of personal values. Specifically, participants whose intentions differed significantly and seemingly irreconcilably from their spouses' were compelled to grapple with the very meaning and nature of marriage and partnership. Confronted with discrepant parenthood intentions, three couples in this study endeavored to resolve their love for, and commitment to, their spouses with discrepant future visions.

For example, a woman recalled her experience of revisiting the meaning and importance of her marital bond. As described in the following statement, this meant working through and resolving her perceived "internal inconsistencies" regarding marriage and family:

> For me, I went back and thought about what has brought me to think that I want children? What do children mean to me? Where are they supposed to come from? And in my view, children come from the relationship. We don't get married to have children. The children are *from* the loving relationship... And I'm thinking that if I'm breaking up with him, then I'm breaking up the *us* for something that is supposed to come from *us*.

For this woman, remaining open to, and empathic of, her spouse's struggle to resolve his own fears and doubts about parenthood allowed for the space and time each needed to arrive at a commitment to parenthood with a mutually enthusiastic vision. Indeed, her spouse spoke of his experience in resolving his fears around parenthood and realigning his priorities as being greatly eased by his wife's understanding: "She created a healthy environment for me to just stew a while.

There was a freedom and space in our conversations…I eventually just figured it out for myself."

Another man similarly reflected on his experience of revisiting the meaning and importance of his marriage, and realigning his priorities accordingly. Although reluctant about proceeding with parenthood despite his wife's enthusiasm, he said this:

> I don't know if [parenthood] was ever something I *really* wanted…But I knew that my wife really wanted a child, and I wanted to give her that. I valued our relationship and I valued the freedoms she'd given me. Yes, I definitely wanted to be with her and I wanted to make her happy. So I had to think about whether I wanted to stick rigidly to my own ideas. Or whether I wanted *us*.

Critical in this participant's story, as with others who remained reluctant to proceed with parenthood, was his partner's willingness to allow him time to resolve his internal struggle. Eventually arriving at a clarification of priorities, wherein the integrity of their marriages was valued above all else, most participants spoke of their initial differences as actually solidifying and enriching their bond and their eventual shared commitment to parenthood.

A final component of participants' emerging sense of readiness for parenthood was their acknowledgement and recognition of their partners' ability to parent. The men and women in this study spoke of an evolving respect for, and confidence in, their spouses' ability to co-parent. Participants' own experience of emergent readiness supported the movement from a self- to other-focus. Freed

from the weight and inertia of their own fears and uncertainties about parenting, participants contemplated their partners' ability to share in the challenges of parenthood. Aspects of this acknowledgement included an evolving respect for their partners' "parenting qualities" and an increased sense of "partnership in parenthood."

Participants recalled an evolving sense of appreciation for the personal strengths and abilities their spouses would bring to parenthood. This appreciation evolved through witnessing their spouses interact in relations with significant others. Although most participants held in high regard their spouses' abilities to parent over the course of their marriage, few consciously deliberated over their partners' competence for parenthood. Working through and resolving their own fears about parenthood and consciously realigning priorities afforded participants a "freedom from self-absorption" regarding the decision of whether to have a child. Participants talked about looking upon their spouse with "new eyes." In particular, their confidence in, and respect for, their partners' parenting strengths grew as they recognized the nurturing qualities and parental wisdom that their spouses had already demonstrated.

For example, one man spoke of his admiration for his wife's maternal wisdom: "Absolutely, no question about it. I knew she would make a great mother. I mean, I know friends who are mothers and they ask *her* for advice!" This man further noted the many children whose lives his wife had touched, whether through friendships or through her employment as a family therapist. A

female participant recalled her experience of revisiting hers and her husband's previous jobs as camp counselors:

> I think we both—for very similar reasons—thought that we would be super parents. I think having seen him interact with kids of all different ages and ethnicities, it made me one hundred percent comfortable to trust in him. Absolutely.

For many participant, acknowledgment of their spouses' parenting abilities further confirmed and solidified their own sense of readiness for parenthood.

Some participants implicated specific events as having endowed them with an enhanced appreciation and respect for their partners' abilities to parent. Observing their spouse care for a sick or dying relative, or witnessing the display of "pure love" for a small child or animal, participants noted the intensely felt, indelible impact of these transformative moments. One woman emotionally recalled her spouse's caring for and devotion to their beloved pet who had struggled with a chronic illness:

> There were obviously many positive factors that were what made me decide to go ahead [with parenthood]. But for me, what really hit—and it's going to sound very silly—was how [my husband] basically saved our dog. He saved his life. He syringed food into him about twelve times a day to try to get his weight up. To see what he did for him, well, I thought, this is it! He just *has* to be a father. It was just amazing. This dog wouldn't be alive if it wasn't for him. I *knew* he'd make a great father.

In referring to these experiences, participants noted a "tuning in" to their partners' strengths and a "growing conviction" within themselves that they *and* their partners were indeed ready for parenthood.

Another aspect of participants' acknowledgment of their spouses' abilities to parent was an emerging sense of partnership as co-parents. Underlying this acknowledgment was a sense that they could "count on" their spouses to share fully in the demands and rewards of parenthood. This acknowledgment was most saliently experienced by the women in this study. Anticipating the challenge of juggling professional aspirations and motherhood, these women spoke of the importance of trusting in their husbands' commitment to and competence as a co-parent. The sentiments expressed by this woman echo the feelings of many participants: "I knew I couldn't do it all. And I *had* to have and have every confidence in him, that he's going to be there. To me, that's not a concern." Other women noted the importance of their spouses' "full investment" in the decision to try to start a family. Often, this investment was sensed through conversations about starting a family. In the words of one woman:

> We talked about me going off [the pill]. I felt he was very on board with
>
> things. He told me he was comfortable with it. Anytime. I think I took
>
> that to mean he wanted this as much as I did.

Emerging from participants' sense of their partners' commitment to co-parenting was a crystallized vision of marriage *and* parenthood co-existing, in unity and harmony. This shared future vision confirmed participants' own sense of readiness for parenthood by endowing them with a sense of "security," "stability,"

and "confidence" in themselves and in their partners. Speaking in phrases such as "I had complete confidence in her" and "I knew I could count on him," participants understood the acknowledgement of their partners' ability to parent as solidifying their own resolve to try to start a family.

In summary, the theme of an emerging sense of readiness for parenthood was experienced by all participants in this study. Participants described both an individual and shared journey toward a felt comfort and confidence with the decision to try to start a family. This journey was constitutive of emerging insights in several areas, including: (a) a conscious realignment of professional and personal priorities; (b) confronting and overcoming one's fears; (c) acknowledgement that it is "never the right time"; (d) spouses' openness to each other's needs and level of readiness for parenthood; and (e) spouses' acknowledgement of their partners' ability to parent. Sensing their own emergent readiness for parenthood, participants "tuned in" to their spouses' interactions with others as these observations validated and confirmed their partners' aptitude for nurturing relationships. Consequently, participants were able to envision parenting—together. This vision propelled couples toward the active pursuit of a pregnancy. Convicted in the recognition of their own and their partners' readiness for parenthood, participants described an evolving sense of excitement and curiosity about the imminent probability of parenthood.

A Sense of Excitement and Curiosity. A sense of excitement and curiosity was a theme evident in participants' recollections of their parenthood decision-making experiences. Having made the decision to try to start a family,

the men and women in this study looked forward to the "challenge" and "adventure" of parenthood and understood their enthusiasm as having been enriched by the deliberate and conscious path they had traveled. As noted earlier, all but one couple in this study was pregnant at the time of the interview. Anticipating the "unimaginable," "massive," and "awesome" changes that would take place with the arrival of their first child, participants articulated several components of their sense of excitement and curiosity. Specifically, all participants stressed their overwhelming curiosity over "meeting" and coming to know their child. The men and women also spoke of intrigue concerning their own and their partners' experience with the novel challenges of parenthood. Finally, many participants described a sense of excitement over their hopes of sharing beloved hobbies and interests with a young child. Important to participants' emerging sense of intrigue was the shift in perspective from fear to excitement and from dread to curiosity. Indeed, the very aspects of parenthood that participants most eagerly anticipated were the same areas that participants had initially looked upon with foreboding and disdain. Speaking to this new posture, one man eloquently summarized the sentiments of many participants as follows:

> I'm really excited and interested to see what happens. There's obviously lots of unknowns. But, you see, I've always loved the unknown! I like to be adventurous. Now I'm looking at [parenthood] as a fun, positive unknown rather than a dreaded unknown. That feels very different for me. I'm really interested to see what happens next!

The men and women in this study expressed curiosity over meeting their unborn child and over witnessing his or her development into maturity. This sense of wonderment involved participants' desire and commitment to honor their child's individuality, as well as a curiosity about which of their own and their spouse's qualities might be reflected in the child. Participants conceived of the former as an extension of their own valuing of individual freedom and autonomous expression, and often linked this perspective to their own experiences as a child. For example, recalling her experience with overcontrolling parents, one woman said of her eager anticipation of the birth of her first child: "I see this child as separate. I don't want to be fused with this child. Rather, I'm wondering who this little person might be. I feel such a wonder and awe about that." Others looked to their own childhood experiences as a model for respecting and honoring their child's individual expression. A woman noted the tolerance for individual differences her parents had afforded her and her siblings. Speaking to this approach, she said of her plans for motherhood: "I really wonder what kind of a soul [this child] will be and what kind of a person he or she will grow up into."

Participants also expressed curiosity over which of their own and their spouses' qualities would be reflected in a child. Critical here was participants' distinction between *intrigue* and *expectation*. That is, the men and women in this study expressed considerable disdain for parents who wish their children to be "clones" of themselves. Rather, the participants emphasized an openness to the myriad of ways in which their own and their partners' qualities might be expressed in a child. In the words of one woman:

I'm looking forward to just watching this person grow and develop. I think we do have a lot of interesting, good qualities. I'm wondering if and how we'll see these in our child. It's interesting just to think about!

Participants further spoke of their curiosity about parenting a child at different ages and levels of development. Projecting "beyond babyhood," these men and women looked to parenthood and the challenges of raising a child from infancy to adulthood with considerable intrigue. A woman reflected on her anticipation of parenthood as follows:

When I think about having a child, obviously first you're given a baby. And some people are very baby-oriented. When I think about parenthood, I don't just think about a baby. I think about the whole course of development. And I wonder who this person will be.

In short, participants experienced a sense of awe and wonder as they anticipated an imminent and desired addition to their family. An aspect of this anticipation stressed by all participants was a commitment to honoring the "individual" their child would be *and* would become. Participants marveled, themselves, at the changes that had taken place in their perceptions of parenthood, and in their intensely felt excitement about the imminent birth of a first child. Most "striking" to participants was the way in which the same aspects of parenthood that were once so dreaded, now held joyful anticipation and wonderment. One man described this journey from fear and foreboding to excitement and awe as follows: "Looking back, it [felt] like a journey through forests and jungles, over mountains and through bushes. We finally arrived at this

beautiful beach on the edge of an island. And now there's this huge, awesome ocean in front of us!"

Another component of participants' sense of excitement and curiosity was their intrigue over their own and their spouse's experience of parenthood, and the rewards and challenges therein. Participants spoke of an openness to, and intrigue about, the "unknowns" of parenthood. Again, this posture of wonderment was construed in stark contrast to participants' previously felt fears and dread regarding the demands of parenthood, and was understood as the culmination of journeying to a place of genuine readiness.

Participants' sense of wonderment for their anticipated experience of parenthood involved different future visions. For some, their excitement concerned meeting the challenge of providing for a child, emotionally and materially. In the words of a female participant: "I'm looking forward to raising as good a human being as possible." A man said this of his excitement over playing such an integral role in another's life:

> I look forward to having our family grow and looking after this child. I
> look forward to being a responsible parent, protecting and nurturing the
> child and setting him or her in the direction we feel he or she should be
> going.

For others, the challenge of providing a balance of autonomy and direction was foremost in their sense of anticipation for parenthood. A man spoke of his enthusiasm for this challenge as follows: "I'm wondering how I'll meet the

challenge of channeling a child's talents, without forcing the child into things. Let's say, guiding the child. I think I'm up for it!"

Another aspect of participants' sense of excitement was curiosity about how their marriages would change and grow as a result of having become parents. Initially having feared the anticipated loss of intimacy and flexibility in their marriages, participants now looked forward to parenthood *adding* an "enriching" and "enhancing" dimension of their relationships. One woman said this of her sense of excitement over this "new chapter" in her own and her husband's relationship:

> I think we have some real joys coming up…My vision is that having this child will strengthen our relationship. It will bring us closer, on a new level. I know it won't be a bed of roses. I'm not sure how things will change exactly, but I think it will be a real miracle for us.

Another participant similarly expressed intrigue over the potential for parenthood to enhance the close bond she and her spouse already shared: "I can just taste the joy and awe of seeing this little being that is made from us, from the two of us. To me, it feels wonderful. It's an extra bond between us." Other participants reflected on their sense of curiosity for the anticipated challenge of parenting—together. In the words of a woman:

> I think it's going to be really interesting. I think [parenthood] is going to be a huge learning experience for both of us. Like will we be consistent? You know, one parent says one thing and the other says something else. Every little thing that comes along will be learning. For us, together.

The participants in this study spoke of an emerging sense of curiosity and excitement over the way in which parenthood would impact them, personally and interpersonally. Intensely felt was participants' anticipation of parenthood adding to—rather than diminishing—the marital bond. This sense of curious anticipation was made more salient by participants' initial uncertainties about parenthood. Having engaged in a deliberate, conscious, and thoughtful journey to readiness for parenthood, these men and women embraced the imminent challenges of parenthood with wonder and excitement.

A final component of participants' experience of curiosity and excitement concerned the anticipated joys of sharing hobbies and interests with a child. Participants spoke of looking forward to sharing coveted past-times with a child, as well as enjoying pursuits that were not part of their own childhoods. Speaking to the former, one participant said this:

> I'm looking forward to having a two or three year old, and doing things that would be fun for them and showing them things. Like playing sports. [My wife] laughs and jokes that whether it's a girl or a boy, it will be born with a soccer ball attached to its foot. That may or may not be the case, but I'm really curious to find out!

Other participants spoke of parenthood as affording an opportunity to reclaim their own sense of youthful wonder and naïveté. In one man's words: "I'm looking forward to sharing things that weren't necessarily part of my childhood. Like Astronomy. I'd love to buy a telescope. There are things that I haven't done myself. It will be like being a kid again myself." "Looking at the world with a

child's eyes," the men and women in this study reflected on their feeling of excitement over sharing their vista with a young child.

In summary, participants described a sense of excitement and curiosity over the anticipated challenges and changes that parenthood would impart. Having arrived at a sense of readiness through a deliberate and conscious choice to embrace parenthood, these men and women looked forward to the awesome wonderment of raising a child. This sense of wonderment involved excitement over "meeting" their child, and supporting and bearing witnessing to his or her development. Participants furthermore described a sense of intrigue regarding their own and their spouses' experience of parenthood. Finally, the men and women in this study anticipated the wonder of sharing cherished hobbies and pursuits—and their views of the world—with a child. This sense of curiosity and excitement was experienced in "striking contrast" to participants' initial sense of the costs and fears regarding parenthood. Embracing the "unknown," participants felt open to and ready for parenthood.

A Sense of Faith in the Relationship. A final theme that emerged in this study on the experience of parenthood decision-making was a sense of enhanced faith on the part of the men and women in terms of their relationships with their spouses. Participants spoke of their parenthood decision-making experiences as having strengthened their relationships with their partners. They felt that their journey toward deciding to try to have a child had revealed their spouses' commitment to their relationship, and had further endowed them with a sense of "connectedness" and "loyalty" to the marriage. Speaking to the former,

participants noted the respect shown by their spouses for their own parenthood desires and needs. Participants felt secure in the knowledge that their relationships had endured, and were indeed strengthened by, often differing notions of if, and when, to start a family. The men and women further spoke of their experiences as having confirmed and enhanced the strength of their marital bonds. Sensing that their relationships were "meant to be," participants felt confirmed in their choice of partners and in the security of their shared futures. Lastly, the men and women believed that the path from uncertainty to the active pursuit of parenthood had increased their sense of preparedness for parenthood. Confident in their choice of life partners, these men and women looked forward to sharing the joys and challenges of parenthood—together.

The men and women in this study felt that their spousal relationships had been enriched by their slow, often difficult journey to parenthood. This was true whether spouses shared an initial ambivalence and eventual enthusiasm about parenthood, or whether spouses initially held discrepant attitudes toward having children. In both cases, spouses rarely arrived at a sense of readiness at exactly the same time. Rather, sensing their partners' honoring of, and respect for, their own needs and level of readiness contributed to participants' trust in their spouses and in their relationships.

For many participants, the fact that neither they nor their spouse "jumped ship" during the difficult and challenging times of their deliberations was understood as evidence of their mutual commitment to the relationship. Recalling their paths of "plodding and stalling," participants spoke of their partners' genuine

efforts to share the struggle as underlying a sense of trust in their partners and in the relationship. A woman, speaking to her own and her spouse's initially discrepant parenthood desires and their subsequent path toward readiness for parenthood, said this:

> We both could have chosen to have said, "This is too big. This is too difficult. I don't want to do this." Instead, it's been about constructing a path together...There was the relationship and also doing our own work. And really genuinely considering one another's perspective...I think we're stronger for having gone through this. We are stronger as individuals and as a couple.

For other participants, having a "voice" in the decision of whether and when to start a family enhanced their faith in their partners' commitment to the marriage. The men and women spoke of their partners' efforts to "hear" and "genuinely consider" their parenthood plans even when these were very discrepant from their own. Participants understood these displays as an extension of their spouses' commitment to the relationship, above and beyond a commitment to meeting their own needs. For example, one woman talked about the way in which she and her spouse eventually found a middle ground wherein her earlier parenthood desires met with her husband's wishes to delay having a child. Recalling this sometimes difficult experience, she expressed her trust in her spouse and in her marriage:

> [Looking back], I guess it was a major power struggle for some time. We each tried to put our little imprint on things, to do it in our own way and in

our own time. We survived because [my husband] is very easy going. He let me rant. He was supportive, not judgmental. And he never pushed his wants too hard. He listened to me and my needs. It was important that I felt that. That I had a voice...I think that I'm more confident that if something else were to come up, I'd have a voice there, too. I trust that.

Sensing their spouses' love of, and commitment to them, participants gained a profound faith in their marriages.

Another facet of participants' faith in their relationships was a sense of the strength of their marital bonds. Participants spoke of the arduous experience of contemplating the consequential and irrevocable decision of whether to have children as having enhanced their sense of connectedness to their spouse. Whether having worked through the decision through quiet inner resolve, through shared dialogues, or a combination thereof, participants felt that this was a shared journey. One man eloquently described this evolving sense of intimacy as follows:

> Like the song, *The Long and Winding Road*, I see [our experience] as a journey. A journey through every kind of landscape. As the journey continued, we became stronger and more connected. Not knowing that at the time we were feeling connected, but looking back I know that we did become more connected.

As revealed in this participant's words, several men and women recognized their relationships as having been deepened by their parenthood decision-making experience. Often, embarking on this journey was the most

trying experience with which couples had met. Having enjoyed the fun and frivolity of their early years of marriage, these couples were confronted with a significant and irrevocable decision. Participants described this undertaking as difficult, but growth-inspiring. They felt that their experiences—specifically, of sharing and confronting their own and each others' fears and future visions—had brought them closer. In short, they found truth in the idiom, "Nothing easy is worth doing."

Some participants saw the shared and successful resolution of the "baby question" as a sign that their relationships were "destined to be." A man who'd arrived at a readiness some time following his wife's expressed desire to begin a family said this of their experience:

> This was definitely a test of our commitment and strength. I think that if we weren't meant to be together, this would have torn us apart. I know less things, much less things have torn people apart. This is probably about as tough as it gets in a relationship. But instead of breaking apart, we came closer together.

This man's sentiments were shared by many participants in the study. Convicted in the strength of their bond, the men and women spoke of their relationships with pride, affection, and confidence.

Other participants noted the important "lessons" they had learned in their journey toward parenthood. Affording lessons in patience, tolerance, communication, and commitment, the journey endowed these couples with "gifts"

that they believed would support and fortify a life time of living and loving together. In the words of one woman:

> I think that our relationship is better for having gone through this experience. We learned many lessons from this. Like that we all have our own challenges to go through, but if it weighs down the relationship you have to talk. We learned how to take a very important issue and not let it totally consume and override us. We've both learned a lot. And it makes for a richer relationship.

Other participants similarly noted the many lessons they'd learned about themselves and their spouses, having gone through the experience of parenthood decision-making. Most intensely felt by participants was learning about the power and importance of commitment. Acknowledging that easier journeys had broken apart many marriage, these men and women recognized and coveted the perceived uncommon fortitude in their relationships.

All the participants talked about their parenthood decision-making experiences as having better prepared them for the imminent probability of parenthood. Underlying this enhanced sense of preparedness was participants' feelings of trust in their spouses and their relationships. The latter was understood as the "firm foundation" from which couples could confidently embrace and appreciate the challenges of parenthood. For example, one woman expressed the feelings of many in her account of her journey to parenthood:

> I think all these things happen for a reason. While we were going through this, I was really wishing it wasn't happening. But I think in the long run,

having gone through this makes us better and stronger as a couple, and

better parents. We will definitely be more appreciative of this child that

we're having.

This woman's sentiments also speak to participants' sense of trust in the

relationship and in themselves for having arrived at parenthood through a

conscious and deliberate *choice*. This shared path of deliberation was understood

to enhance participants' preparedness for parenthood.

This foundation of trust in one another was furthermore conceived of as

the rock that would fortify participants in other shared future endeavors. Having

successfully worked through this very significant decision, participants expressed

a new found sense of competence and confidence in their relationships. Sensing

that they could "work through just about anything," participants felt that their

parenthood decision-making experiences had confirmed and solidified the

strength within themselves and their marriages. Future challenges—the most

immediate and intensely felt being parenthood—were looked to with faith,

optimism, and shared gusto.

In summary, the participants described an enhanced sense of faith in their

relationships as a consequence of their parenthood decision-making experiences.

Working through and resolving the decision of whether or not to have a child had

endowed these men and women with an increased appreciation for their spouses'

commitment to the relationship, as well as their own. Especially important to the

participants who'd harbored discrepant parenthood plans was the sense that they

and their spouses had "stuck it out" and, more than that, found a path that met

their individual needs and that nourished their current and future relationships. All participants acknowledge having learned critical lessons about themselves, about their spouses, and about marriage. They felt that having endured the journey of parenthood decision-making, and having learned so much along the way, served to further solidify and fortify their marriages. Convicted in their choice of partners and in the strength of their marital bond, participants looked to parenthood and other future endeavors with faith and confidence.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

The focus of this chapter is to discuss the significance of the findings of

the present study in relation to the extant literature on parenthood decision-

making, and to clinical practice and future research endeavors. This discussion

begins with a restatement of the purpose of the study. Thereafter, a detailed

discussion of the theoretical implications of the present results is offered. Next, a

discussion of the implications of these results for counselling practice is

presented. The chapter concludes with a review of the limitations of the study

and recommendations for future study of parenthood decision-making.

Restatement of the Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore couples' experiences in deciding

if, and when, to have children, and to identify common themes in the accounts of

couples who had made this choice. The primary research question addressed in

this investigation was: "**What is the meaning and experience of deciding to**

start a family for couples who were initially undecided about having

children?" A phenomenological approach was used to illuminate couples'

understanding and lived experience of parenthood decision-making.

Theoretical Implications

The results of the present study reveal the experience of parenthood

decision-making to be a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon. The experience

was described as a slow, often arduous evolution of shifting values, goals, and

perceptions of oneself, of one's partner, and of parenthood itself. These results

potentially augment the extant literature on parenthood decision-making. A comparative discussion of this extant research and the findings of the present study is thus offered below.

Almost all of the participants in the present study described an initial sense of the significant and irrevocable costs of parenthood. This perception of the potential sacrifices to professional, personal, and interpersonal values and goals that parenthood could potentially impart was felt intensely by the men and women in this study, and informed a posture of ambivalence and postponement regarding the decision of whether to have a child. Although not directly addressed in their study, this finding is consistent with Soloway and Smith's (1987) observations of the family injunctions against early birthtiming among 15 dual career couples. Inherent in these injunctions were concerns regarding the impact of parenthood on participants' educational, career, and financial advancement, and marital intimacy. Furthermore, as with the present study, these negative perceptions of parenthood informed and reinforced perpetual postponement of parenthood decision-making, in favor of an ambiguously defined, later "right time." Supporting the relevance and validity of these comparisons are the similarities in the nature of the samples used in the present study and in Sololway and Smith's investigation. That is, both studies drew on the experiences of dual-career couples where both spouses were 30 years of age or older. Despite these similarities, important differences exist in participants' accounts of their parenthood decision-making experiences in these two studies.

Specifically, Soloway and Smith's (1987) participants implicated family messages against early birthtiming as *the* most influential factor in their decision to postpone parenthood. This finding contrasts with participants' accounts in the present study, wherein none of the participants implicated family injunctions as having directly impacted their parenthood decision-making experiences. Rather, these men and women described personal traits—for example, having an "adventurous spirit"—and a valuing of independence, risk-taking, and worldly adventure as most significant to their initial sense of the costs of parenthood. Also inconsistent between the present study and the findings of Soloway and Smith was the emphasis in the latter study on the "biological clock," as it precipitated a reassessment of family messages to delay childbearing. Although all the participants in the present study implicated advancing age as a factor compelling their engagement of the "baby question," concern over age was described as only *one* of many facets of their eventual resolve to actively address if, and when, they wished to begin a family.

These differences in study results may have to do with differences in the focus and purpose of the two studies. Whereas the present study was formative and exploratory in nature, Soloway and Smith (1987) endeavored to reveal the temporal sequence of late parenthood decisions. This latter aim may have led the researchers to stress a common temporal pathway of birthtiming, that obscured and neglected the many complexities of their participants' experiences. A second explanation for these differences also concerns methodological differences between the studies. Couples in the Soloway and Smith study were interviewed

after they had had at least one child. In comparison to the present study, the experience of having actually become a parent and the lengthy delay between their decision-making experiences and the interviews may have shaped Soloway and Smith's participants' recollections of what emerged, in the present study, as a complex, multi-dimensional, non-linear experience.

Other researchers have implicated perceptions of the costs of parenthood as an important facet of individuals' and couples' decision-making experiences. For example, the findings of Seccombe's (1991) survey of a large sample of American households resonate with the present study. Seccombe observed no differences in men's and women's ratings of the significance of the costs of parenthood. The women in Seccombe's study did, however, implicate the loss of work hours and the concomitant loss of financial independence as being a more salient cost than did male participants. This finding is consistent with the accounts of participants in the present study. Although both men and women perceived the loss of career mobility and advancement as a potential cost of parenthood, the actual nature of the loss was conceived of differently between men and women depending on their expected involvement in childrearing. Most women anticipated that the demands of bearing and rearing a child would compete with, and potentially compromise, their career and financial aspirations. Men, on the other hand, initially perceived parenthood as an untenable threat to their coveted professional freedoms, including the freedom to pursue nontraditional, often unstable careers.

The sense of the potential costs of parenthood articulated by participants in the present study also coheres with the accounts of decision making given by the "programmatic postponers" in Daniels and Weingarten's (1980) study of the parenthood decision-making patterns of 72 couples. Participants in Daniels and Weingarten's study cited several hindering factors in their postponement of parenthood decision-making. Among these factors—and in common with the present study—were the need for psychological readiness and personal growth; the desire to explore leisure and worldly pursuits; the desire to solidify one's marriage; and the wish to pursue career goals. Implicit in these hindering factors is the assumption that parenthood would potentially compromise these goals, and would thus constitute a significant cost to personal, interpersonal, and professional advancement—costs that were very salient to the participants in the present study.

In short, a comparison between the results of this study and other research literature on parenthood decision-making reveals the perception of the costs of parenthood, and an almost exclusive focus on these costs versus any potential benefits, to be a significant component of individuals' initial reluctance to pursue parenthood. This observation resonates with, and advances on, the theoretical postulations of social exchange (Emerson, 1976, 1981; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) and reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) theory, most notably, the idea that decision-making occurs in a subjective environment. For example, consistent with social exchange theory, participants in this study initially anticipated the benefits of childfree roles—for example, flexible career opportunities and close

marital relations—to outweigh the expected benefits of having and raising a child. The observed sex differences in wives' and husbands' experiences of the occupational costs of parenthood can also be accounted for within a social exchange framework. More precisely, the findings of the present study suggest that, perhaps owing to their typically greater investment in childbearing and rearing, some women experience the employment and financial costs of parenthood to initially outweigh the anticipated rewards of having a child.

Corresponding to reasoned action theory (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), participants' ambivalence could be construed as a function of their initial belief that a childfree lifestyle would support more positive outcomes, and would be more favorably evaluated by their spouses, than would parenthood. The results of this study extend upon these models, however, in beginning to illuminate *how* various reproductive alternatives, and their potential outcomes, are experienced and understood by couples who are attempting to decide if, and when, to have a child. In particular, participants' experiences reveal the profound and indeed primary role that personal values and meaning play in informing individuals' perceptions of parenthood versus other lifestyle choices. In this study, parenthood decision-making emerged as a complex, value-laden experience that is intricately and inextricably grounded in the meaning with which individuals and couples endow parenthood versus other lifestyle choices.

Passionately expressed and vehemently defended by almost all participants in this study were the values of autonomy, risk-taking, and worldly adventure. These values underlay participants' self-perceptions as "trailblazers"

and "rebels," and the concomitantly felt incongruity between coveted personal and professional pursuits, and the roles and responsibilities of parenthood. Confronted with seemingly irreconcilable differences between their values and goals, and the perceived demands of having and raising a child, participants initially focused on the costs of parenthood to the exclusion of its potential benefits. This selective focus, in turn, further fueled and justified ambivalence about starting a family, and, moreover, supported the perceived benefits of a childfree choice. Suggested by these experiences is the way in which values and beliefs inform cost-benefit analyses in parenthood decision-making. For some, the perceived costs of having and raising a child are initially construed as untenable threats to important professional, personal, and relational values, and confirm and further fuel ambivalence and undecidedness about having a child.

A second, and similarly value-laden facet of the participants' experience of parenthood decision-making in the present study, was a sense of fear. Participants described several components of this fear, including fear of not being a good parent, worries regarding the challenges of raising a child, and concerns over advancing age. These findings resonate with the results of other studies that endorse individuals' concerns over replicating the mistakes of their own parents, as a factor often leading to the postponement of parenthood decision making or a childfree choice (Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Soloway & Smith, 1987; Wilk, 1986). Poorly articulated and only indirectly implied in this previous literature, however, is the meaning that underlies these fears. In the current study, many participants described lofty, "perfectionistic" standards for themselves and others. They

understood these standards as underlying their fears of not measuring up to the challenges of parenthood, including concerns over repeating the inevitable mistakes that their own parents had made. This discrepancy with the previous literature may reflect differences in methodological approaches. The unstructured, experientially-oriented nature of the interviews in the present study afforded participants an opportunity to reflect on the meaning underlying their initial fears.

Similar to the accounts of participants in this investigation, several studies further implicate concerns over advancing age or the "biological clock" as an important component of parenthood decision-making (Beckman, Aizenberg, Forsythe, & Day, 1983; Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Soloway & Smith, 1987). Beckman and her colleagues, for example, found that age had a direct, positive effect on couples' short-term fertility desires and intentions. Cowan and Cowan's investigation, along with Soloway and Smith's study, corroborate age as a factor compelling couples into active engagement of the decision of if, and when, to have a child. Findings from the current study potentially extend these results in several ways.

First, the above cited studies almost exclusively focus on the woman's age. In the present study, concerns over having and raising a child at an older age were expressed by all the female participants and at least half of the men. Not surprisingly, the nature of the women's and men's fears differed, with women expressing concern over bearing a child at an older age and men expressing concern over their ability to fully enjoy and participate in raising a child at an older age. Also intriguing in the current study—and not well documented in

previous literature—were the contradictory pressures that advanced age imparted in participants' decision-making experiences. Participants worried about the impact of their own or their spouses typically advanced age on their fitness for parenthood, while at the same time they worried about waiting too long to start a family. These opposing pressures initially dis-enabled participants' movement toward readiness for parenthood. In short, this and previous research suggests that age imparts a critical, but complex, influence on parenthood decision-making and that both men and women experience concerns about age as they contemplate a future with or without children.

A further aspect of the experience of parenthood decision-making articulated in the current study, and not well documented in previous research literature or extant models of decision-making, is changing perceptions from the costs to the gains of parenthood. The men and women in this study described a slow shift in their perceptions, from the perceived costs to the many gains that parenthood could potentially impart in their lives and relationships. Although several studies have investigated, typically retrospectively, the perceived benefits of parenthood (e.g., Neal, Groat, & Wicks, 1989; Seccombe, 1991), few have accounted for a shift toward the perceived gains of parenthood among initially ambivalent individuals, nor has the extant research and theoretical literature discussed the influences that facilitate this critical shift. In their study, Soloway and Smith (1987) explored couples' reassessment of family injunctions against early birthtiming. Consistent with the current study, the researchers observed that couples, compelled by advancing age, revisited family messages regarding the

potentially negative impact of parenthood on career, financial, personal, and relationship aspirations. Similar to participants in the current study, for the men and women in Soloway and Smith's study this reassessment afforded a new, more positive view of parenthood. However, not well described in Soloway and Smith's investigation is how this reassessment evolved into a more enhancing perception of the potential gains of parenthood. Although participants in both studies implicated age as motivating a shift in perspective, the men and women in the present study further implicated several internal and external influences as facilitating a shift in perception from the costs to the potential benefits of parenthood.

Regarding the former, participants noted an increased sense of personal and relationship maturity, as well as a fear of missing out on the challenges and joys of parenthood. More precisely, feeling that they had arrived at a place of stability and security in their relationships and respective careers, spouses spoke of their emerging appreciation for the emotional resources that they could offer a child. Confronted with their advancing age, some women also described fear of missing out on the unique experiences of parenthood as underlying their emergent openness to the potential benefits of starting a family. With respect to external influences, the men and women in the present study spoke of the positive parenting experiences of significant others as contributing to their appreciation for the potential benefits of parenthood. Particularly powerful were the experiences of new parents who had also been initially ambivalent about having children. Their enthusiasm for and enjoyment of parenthood afforded the men and women

in this study a new reference group—one that supported changed perceptions of parenthood, from loss to gain and from sacrifice to reward. Participants' emerging recognition for the possible gains of becoming a parent stimulated consideration of and openness to the ways that parenthood could potentially co-exist with the values and ideals with which these men and women so ardently identified. More precisely, participants slowly began to appreciate the way in which parenthood could support, rather than undermine, their values of achievement and excellence. This meaning-making endeavor was thus constitutive of a shift both in participants' perceptions of parenthood and in their own self-perceptions. Regarding the former, participants came to realize four areas of potential gain, namely: (a) personal growth; (b) shared emotional intimacy with a child; (c) the pleasure of contributing to and witnessing a child's development; and (d) an enhanced sense of family unity. Participants' shifted self-perceptions involved integrating coveted values with the demands of raising a child. Envisioning a future wherein their adventurous spirits could meet with the challenges of parenthood, participants described an emergent "doable," life-enhancing view of parenthood.

Corresponding to decision-making theory, these observation best resonate with reasoned action theory's (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) postulation that individuals' fertility intentions are a function, in part, of their attitudes toward various reproductive alternatives. In the present study, participants' changed perceptions from the costs to the potential gains of parenthood were predicated upon both an emotional and cognitive shift, and were expressed in a slowly

emergent openness and intention to pursue parenthood in the future. Importantly, however, whereas participants' decision-making experiences roughly cohere with the principles of reasoned action theory, this model does not well explicate how shifts in reproductive attitudes and subsequent intentions occur. The present study thus potentially augments previous research and parenthood decision-making models in more comprehensively accounting for the influences that facilitate ambivalent or undecided couples' movement from the perception of the costs of parenthood, toward a more flexible, positive perspective on the potential gains that parenthood can impart, personally and interpersonally.

A sense of readiness was also an important component of participants' parenthood decision-making experiences. This readiness was felt as an increased comfort and confidence with the imminent probability of starting a family, and involved both a personal and shared openness to the demands and challenges of raising a child. Specifically, participants' sense of readiness was supported by their individual and shared efforts to confront and resolve inhibiting values, fears, and uncertainties around parenthood. At an individual level, participants in this study described a process of quiet contemplation of their values and goals, and of the anticipated ramifications of parenthood versus a childfree lifestyle. Also implicated here was a dawning awareness that "you can't have it all," and a subsequent deliberate realignment of priorities. For many men and women in the present study, this realignment involved an openness to slowing down professionally, or taking time away from one's career. At a shared level, participants in this study stressed the importance of an openness to one another's

desires and readiness for parenthood, irrespective of their own. While individuals' efforts to rework priorities have received scant regard in previous literature, the latter findings correspond somewhat to the results of other research literature on the relative impact of spouses' childbearing and childtiming intentions (Beckman et al., 1983; Miller & Pasta, 1996; Thomson, 1997).

For example, in her study of the effects of husbands' and wives' parenthood desires on their spouses' childbearing intentions and behavior, Thomson (1997) found that spouses' childbearing intentions and desires imparted relatively comparable influences on one another's intentions and subsequent births. Thomson's analysis furthermore revealed that spousal disagreement imparted an inhibiting impact, such that disagreeing couples were less likely to have a child than were agreeing couples. Miller and Pasta (1996), moreover, proffer a model of fertility decision-making that implicates spouses' parenthood motivations as they influence one another's eventual intention to have children. In this model, spouses influence the formation of one another's childbearing attitudes and desires through informal daily exchanges and shared life experiences. These observations correspond with the results of the present study, in endorsing the significance of both spouses' input into parenthood decisions and in implicating spousal disagreement in couples' postponement of parenthood. The present study, however, extends these previous findings and theorizing, as it begins to reveal the nature and meaning of couples' shared experiences in resolving whether or not to have a child.

More precisely, the participants in the present study implicated an

openness to their partners' needs, desires, and level of readiness—irrespective of their own—as underlying their eventual shared readiness for parenthood. Few spouses arrived at a sense of readiness at exactly the same time. In three cases, spouses held entirely discrepant parenthood desires. In endeavoring to resolve these discrepancies, participants were compelled to revisit their values and beliefs about marriage and parenthood, and realign their priorities accordingly. Honoring their commitment to their marriages and to their spouses, participants sought to understand and appreciate one another's position. In all cases, spouses spoke of this understanding as affording the time and space each needed to arrive at readiness with sincere resolve and enthusiasm.

The experiences of couples in this study and others (e.g., Soloway & Smith, 1987; Thomson, 1997) suggest that parenthood decision-making is indeed constitutive of the childbearing intentions and desires of both spouses. With respect to theories of decision-making, these observations best cohere with the assumptions of the reasoned action model (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980): namely, that individuals' decisions reflect their attitudes towards, and social norms about, the predicted outcome of one decision alternative over another. However, whereas this and other previous models of joint decision-making assume an additive influence of spouses' respective desires and intentions, the experiences of couples in the present study endorse a more asymmetrical, value-laden approach to resolving differences in spouses' desires and readiness for parenthood. Spouses in this study understood their decision-making experiences as embedded in, and informed by, the respect and love they had for one another. These findings extend

upon previous theoretical and research literature, in suggesting that parenthood decision-making is, for some couples, best conceptualized as a personal and interpersonal phenomenon that is inextricably embedded within the meaning and values that spouses bring to their relationships. These findings furthermore support the notion that spouses' may compromise, or even concede, their own desires in the interest of marital stability, satisfaction, and growth.

Importantly, however, these conclusions may not extend to all couples and may rather reflect the nature of the spousal relationships in this study. All couples described their marriages as egalitarian. Consistent with other writers' contentions (Corijn, Liefbroer, & Gierveld, 1996; Thomson, 1997), it is possible that gendered or sex-specific power is less of an issue in egalitarian, as opposed to traditional, marriages. Also important to emphasize is the fact that couples in this study, as a criterion for participation, had resolved any ambivalence or discrepancies regarding their parenthood plans, in favor of becoming parents. The openness and understanding to differences that spouses showed one another thus may reflect couples' pre-existing strength in coping and resolving differences. A related point is that couples in the present study may have better communicated their respective parenthood desires and intentions to one another than do other couples. This observation is supported by Severy and Silver's (1993) study of joint decision making in contraceptive use. Corresponding to the present investigation, Severy and Silver's study strongly implicated the mutual and reciprocal influence that spouses' contraceptive choices had on one another. However, Severy and Silver found that many couples in their study

miscommunicated about and misconstrued each other's attitudes and intentions about family planning methods.

A further inconsistency between participants' experiences in the present study and previous research and theorizing about parenthood decision-making concerns differences in conceptualizing the *decision* to start a family. Participants in the present study described their experience as a process of slowly moving toward a felt readiness for parenthood. None of the participants spoke of their decision-making experience as a discrete event. Rather, they spoke of their eventual resolve to begin a family as the culmination of evolving perceptions and values around the meaning of parenthood, marriage, and life itself. Underlying and integral to this evolution was the meaning endowed in pursuing parenthood versus other life choices. This experience does not cohere well with previous models of parenthood decision-making or decision-making, in general, that imply a predictable, linear sequence of fertility attitudes, desires, and actions (e.g., Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Emerson, 1976; 1981; Miller & Pasta, 1996; White & Kim, 1987). In particular, both social exchange (Emerson; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) and reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein) theories posit a means-end approach to decision-making, wherein individuals systematically evaluate the expected consequences of one behavioral alternative over another. This evaluation ultimately informs a rational decision event. These models, while contributing important insights into the factors that influence childbearing and childtiming desires, do not well account for the non-linear and value-laden experiences described by participants in this study.

Also not well accounted for in the extant research or models of decision-making is the notion of the degree of uncertainty under which participants in this study acted. That is, the men and women in the present study described a process of coming to terms with lingering fears and doubts, and choosing to pursue a pregnancy despite, rather than because of, the resolution of these concerns. Critical to what could be construed as "unreasonable" behavior from traditional decision-making approaches was the emerging realization that there is never a "right time," nor a perfect set of circumstances, from which to embrace the irrevocable, life-altering changes that parenthood imparts. These results challenge the concepts of "rationality" and "reason" on which social exchange (Emerson, 1976, 1981; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) and reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein, 1967) theories are respectively predicated. It is arguably the case that, while some aspects of these models resonate with the experiences of participants in the present study, the nature and complexities of parenthood decision-making are not comprehensively accounted for by either theory. Rather, the findings of the present study suggest the need for a more phenomenological conceptualization of parenthood decision-making, one that can account for the seemingly irrational, non-linear, and uncertain journey on which undecided or ambivalent couples embark in deciding if, and when, to have a child.

Further suggested by the findings in this study is the relationship-enhancing impact that the arduous journey of parenthood decision-making may impart in couples' lives. Whether spouses had shared an initial ambivalence about parenthood or had held discrepant desires and plans, all participants spoke

of their journey as having solidified their commitment to, and sense of strength in, their marriages. These findings contrast starkly with the results of other studies on parenthood decision-making, which typically cast ambivalent or conflicted couples in a negative, troubled light (Cowan and Cowan, 1992; Daniels & Weingarten, 1982). Cowan and Cowan, for example, found that "ambivalent" and "yes/no" couples were less able to problem-solve than were "planful" couples. These discrepancies may perhaps be accounted for by the nature of the sample in the present study, namely, couples who had *successfully* resolved any initial ambivalence or differences regarding parenthood plans. The present study does augment previous literature in suggesting that some couples who are initially undecided can, and indeed do, resolve ambivalent or discrepant parenthood plans. Moreover, these results offer an optimistic alternative to extant literature in suggesting that the often difficult journey of parenthood decision-making can solidify and even enhance couples' sense of connectedness to, and faith in, their relationships.

In summary, the results of the present study potentially extend upon previous theoretical and research literature in several ways, and suggest intriguing implications for counselling practice and future research. This study supports some of the contentions of decision-making theorists (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Emerson, 1976, 1981; Nye, 1979; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), most notably, in implicating a cost-benefit comparison in couples' parenthood decision-making experiences. The men and women in the present study understood their initial ambivalence to reflect their perceptions of the significant and irrevocable costs of

having and raising a child. Similarly, participants' eventual readiness for parenthood was constitutive, in part, of an emerging recognition of the gains that parenthood could impart, personally and interpersonally. The present findings furthermore endorse the integral role—posited by reasoned action theory (Ajzen & Fishbein) and corroborated in previous studies (Beckman et al., 1983; Miller & Pasta, 1996; Thomson, 1990)—of the marital dyad in the formation and eventual resolution of reproductive decisions. Spouses in the present study identified an openness to one another's childbearing desires and intentions, irrespective of their own, as critical to their trust in one another and in the relationship, and to their eventual shared readiness for parenthood. Importantly, however, the present study potentially extends upon previous theorizing and research literature, in illuminating why and how one action alternative—in this case, parenthood— comes to be experienced more favorably than another. As well, these results suggest an alternative, more experiential conceptualization of parenthood decision-making than traditional means-end decision theories provide.

In particular, the present study confirms the primary role of values and meaning-making in couples' experiences of parenthood, versus other lifestyle choices, and thus contributes insights into how couples understand, make meaning of, and choose among family planning alternatives. Participants' contemplation and construction of parenthood in their lives and relationships was informed by, and premised upon, the meaning with which they endowed parenthood versus a childfree choice. This meaning-making involved reflection, at an individual and shared level, on the congruence between participants' values, aspirations, and

self-perceptions, and the demands of parenthood; on participants' sense of fitness and readiness for starting a family; and on spouses' understanding of and commitment to the marital relationship. This latter finding, specifically, augments reasoned action theory's (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) focus on referent norms, in suggesting that spouses' willingness to consider and integrate their partner's parenthood desires into their own is predicated upon each spouses' sense of commitment to their relationship and to each other. The results of the present study further extend upon the concept of referent norms, in highlighting the salience of significant others' experiences with parenthood to individuals' perceptions of the relative costs and gains of having a child. The positive parenting experiences of one's norm group may prompt and support a shift in ambivalent individuals' perceptions of parenthood, from loss to its many potential gains.

The findings of this study also contribute an experiential perspective to the existing literature and models of decision-making, in suggesting parenthood decision-making to be a non-linear and multifaceted experience. Indeed, couples' eventual resolution to begin a family was experienced less as a static decision, per se, and more as the culmination of shifting values, perceptions, and meaning-making. Couples described a slow process of moving away from the perceived cost of having and raising children, toward a positive, life- and relationship-enhancing view of parenthood. This change involved both shifts in participants' self-perceptions and in their perceptions of parenthood, and was facilitated by internal and external influences. Internal influences included a sense of personal

and relationship maturity, as well as participants' fears of missing out on the challenges and joys of parenthood. External influences involved the positive parenting experiences of close friends and relatives. Participants' changed perceptions, furthermore, afforded a new perspective wherein coveted ideals, values, and their self-views could co-exist with, and even be strengthened by, parenthood. Planfully making space for the challenges of parenthood in their lives, relationships, and self-perceptions, the men and women in this study engaged in a conscious reordering of personal and professional priorities. Ultimately, couples forged ahead in the active pursuit of a pregnancy, despite lingering doubts and fears about the changes that parenthood would inevitably impart. The decision-making experience described in the present study is thus appropriately conceptualized, not as a rational or discrete decision event, but rather as a fluid culmination of changed perceptions of self, of marriage, and of parenthood.

Implications for Counselling

The findings of this study contribute important insights for counsellors working with couples who are ambivalent or conflicted about their parenthood desires and intentions. The value of these contributions rests, in part, in the unique nature of the sample used in this study, namely, couples who had *successfully* resolved initial uncertainty about their parenthood plans in favor of having a child. In exploring the experiences of these men and women in deciding if, and when, to have children, this study has implications for the process by

which mental health professionals can support couples' engagement with, and resolution of, parenthood, and possibly other decision-making endeavors.

First, the experiences of the men and women in this study suggest that ambivalence or conflict in spouses' parenthood plans may impart distress in an otherwise stable and satisfying relationship. Marital therapists and other professionals who work with couples should consider parenthood decision-making as an area of potential difficulty. Furthermore, when working with couples who are endeavoring to decide to have a child or not, counsellors should focus their therapeutic efforts on the issues presented by the couple and should avoid presuming that the relationship, in general, is distressed. The men and women in this study described their experience as one of resolving value-laden, meaning-making issues regarding the pursuit of parenthood versus other lifestyle choices. Spouses emphasized issues of values and perceptions—rather than poor decision-making or problem-solving abilities—as underlying their sometimes initially discrepant sense of readiness for parenthood. Counsellors may best support such couples in their decision-making efforts by exploring spouses' respective values and the concomitant way that each spouse perceives the potential losses and gains of parenthood versus a childfree choice. This recommendation resonates with the observations of Soloway and Smith (1987), who note that counsellors may expend inordinate and unproductive effort focusing on the wrong issues—for example, poor communication or negative feelings between spouses—when working with couples who are attempting to resolve parenthood plans.

A second and related clinical implication concerns the therapeutic focus that is suggested by the experiences of couples in this study. Many participants described their initial perception of the irreconcilable differences between their valuing of autonomy and excellence, and the demands of parenthood. This perceived incongruity was an important factor underlying their fears and doubts about parenthood and their postponement of parenthood decision-making. Participants moreover stressed the importance of their evolving appreciation for the way in which parenthood could contribute to, rather than compromise, their values and aspirations. This endeavor was both a personal and shared exploration, and supported an emergent sense of readiness for parenthood. These findings suggest that counsellors may support individuals' and spouses' decision-making efforts by exploring with them the values and attitudes that underlie their indecision. This therapeutic focus might also include an exploration of the ways in which individuals' values could potentially coexist with, and even be enhanced by, parenthood or voluntary childlessness.

Participants in this study described their parenthood decision-making experiences as having been constitutive of both a personal and shared journey. They stressed the importance of having had the time and space to work through their uncertainties and fears—alone. Spouses also spoke of coming together, of hearing one another's perspectives, and of dialoguing about future possibilities with and without children. These accounts imply a third implication. Counsellors working with couples who are endeavoring to resolve parenthood decisions should appreciate the personal and interpersonal components of this experience.

In turn, these professionals may encourage couples to recognize which issues are "individual issues" and which are "couple issues," and to engage them accordingly. A possibility suggested by two couples in this study, is for undecided or conflicted couples to work with counsellors on both an individual and couples basis. Issues for individual therapy indicated by the findings of this study are mentioned above, and include exploration of the meaning and values that underlie individuals' respective perception of the costs and gains of parenthood. The counsellor may also encourage self-exploration, among ambivalent individuals, of the ways in which parenthood does or does not fit with their self-perceptions, and perceptions of the relative stability and security of their relationships. Participants' experiences also point to childhood and family of origin issues as a potential focus for individual counselling. Here, counsellors might work with clients to explore the early experiences that inform their fears around failing as a parent or replicating their own parents' mistakes. A counselling goal may be to assist clients to develop their *own* vision of a future with or without children—and their abilities to cope with the challenges of those respective choices—such that clients' reproductive decisions are premised less on fear and more on personal choice and lifestyle preference.

Regarding potential topics for couples therapy, a critical aspect of the shared journey in this study was spouses' respective commitment to honoring and appreciating each others' desires and level of readiness, irrespective of their own. This was described by all couples in the study, and was viewed as an integral factor in supporting couples' eventual shared readiness for parenthood. This

finding suggests that traditional approaches to marital therapy, for example, those that focus on increasing communication or teaching decision-making skills, may not be appropriately applied to all couples. Rather, counsellors may assist spouses by encouraging them to dwell inward and work through their own issues, and to afford their partners support, respect, and understanding, as they work through their feelings and fears regarding this life-altering decision. Such an approach honors both the individual and shared nature of couples' journeys toward deciding if, and when, to have children.

A fourth implication for counselling suggested by the findings in this study is the potential benefit of group support for couples who are struggling to resolve whether or not to have children. Many participants in this study described their experiences as isolating. They presumed that other couples easily and readily resolved reproductive decisions, and that few were plagued by the uncertainties and fears that they felt so intensely. Participating in this research project proved to be a normalizing experience, as the participants realized—often for the first time—that many couples struggle with ambivalence or conflict over parenthood decision-making. The experiences of these men and women suggest that groups may be useful in affording some couples a supportive and normalizing environment in which to explore their ambivalence and uncertainties, including various lifestyle alternatives and the possible ramifications thereof.

A fifth clinical contribution suggested by the results of this study concerns the potentially positive outcomes of couples' parenthood decision-making experiences. Without exception, the men and women in this study felt that their

slow, deliberate, and often difficult path toward readiness for parenthood endowed them with increased faith in, and appreciation for, their relationship, as well as an enhanced sense of preparedness for parenthood. Finding meaning in their arduous journeys, these couples felt that they were better and stronger for their experiences. These findings suggest that meaning-making is a potentially valuable therapeutic focus for couples struggling with parenthood decision-making and other important marital issues. Making sense of their experiences may assist couples in moving beyond blaming and hostility, and in reframing their experiences such that they are able to benefit from, and even be strengthened by, profound personal and marital trials.

Finally, the experiences of the men and women in this study suggest that the instillation of hope is an appropriate and potentially powerful therapeutic goal when working with couples who are struggling to resolve parenthood decisions. A related recommendation is for counsellors to appreciate that some couples may never reach a point of absolute certainty regarding their decision to start a family. Rather, a successful outcome for some couples may be to reach to a point of readiness wherein both spouses are willing to make a leap of faith regarding the decision to pursue parenthood, or to remain childless. In short, supporting couples' movement toward a mutually satisfying decision, as opposed to a full resolution of lingering fears and doubts, may be the most appropriate and realistic therapeutic goal for counsellors working with couples who are conflicted or ambivalent about their parenthood plans.

In summary, counsellors who routinely work with couples need to appreciate parenthood decision-making as a legitimate therapeutic issue. Therapeutic foci should be suggested by the couple, and, specifically, by their understanding of the issues in need of exploration. Counsellors need to recognize ambivalent or conflicted parenthood plans as reflecting, at least in part, spouse's respective values and perceptions of parenthood versus other lifestyle choices. It should not be presumed that such couples lack skills to problem solve or make decisions. Rather, parenthood decision-making should be conceptualized as a value-laden, meaning-making process that engages spouses both personally and interpersonally. Assisting couples to explore the values and perceptions that underlie their respective concerns may be a useful therapeutic effort, as may be affording couples an opportunity to explore their experiences in a supportive group environment. Finally, counsellors need to appreciate, and emphasize to couples who are struggling with their parenthood plans, the potential for personal and marital growth that may result from the often arduous experience of parenthood decision-making.

Limitations

Several limitations of the present study warrant discussion. These limitations are inherent to phenomenological research, and suggest caution in the interpretation of this study's results.

First, the results of the present study were derived from the experiences of a small, homogenous group of individuals. It is widely accepted among decision theorists (e.g., Azjen & Fishbein, 1980; Emerson, 1976, 1981; Thibaut &

Kelley, 1959), and moreover, has been well documented in research studies

(Corijn, Liefbroer, & Gierveld, 1996; Severy & Silver, 1993) that factors such as

race, socioeconomic status, educational attainment, and marital stability and

quality, mediate individuals' decision-making. The experiences of parenthood

decision-making articulated by participants in this study—all of whom where well

educated, of middle- to high socioeconomic status, and who reported strong,

stable marriages—thus cannot be applied to all ambivalent or undecided couples,

nor should the results be extended to couples' decision-making experiences, in

general. It remains to be determined how well the couples' decision-making

experiences in this study—namely, a deliberate and thoughtful process of

choosing among reproductive alternatives—describe the parenthood decision-

making experiences of others. For many couples, pregnancies are neither planned

nor expected. The results of this study thus apply to the eight participating

couples, although the themes may well resonate with the experiences of other

couples.

A second limitation of this study concerns the use of conjoint interviews.

Although couples reported appreciating the opportunity to share their experiences

together, it is possible that participants excluded or misrepresented some aspects

of their experiences owing to their spouses' presence during the research

interviews. It is also possible that this approach, in endeavoring to uncover the

shared components of spouses' experiences, minimized any potential differences

in the men's and women's experiences of parenthood decision-making. This was

not considered to be particularly problematic, however, as it was the aim of this

investigator to highlight the experiences of spouses, set against the backdrop of the relationship context in which their parenthood decisions were ultimately constructed. Furthermore, many researchers suggest that couple interviewing actually supports more accurate and complete accounts of shared experiences between spouses (Daniels & Weingarten, 1982; LaRossa, 1977). The possibility nevertheless remains that participants in this study did not fully describe their experiences of parenthood decision-making, and that the methodology did not fully capture differences in men's and women's experiences. Caution is thus warranted in interpreting the present results.

A third potential shortcoming concerns the inherent limitations of retrospective accounts. Retrospective bias, a well-known phenomenon in the social sciences, concerns the tendency of individuals to construct their recollections to cohere with their present circumstances and views (e.g., Christensen, 1991). Traditional quantitative research methods typically seek to minimize this distortion by, for example, collecting data immediately after the target of inquiry has occurred. In this study, retrospective accounts served as the primary source of data. The findings of this study are thus bound by the extent to which participants could richly and accurately recall their decision-making experiences. Participants were sometimes prompted to revisit discussions or thoughts that they had had many years previous, in their accounts of deciding if, and when, to have children. While most participants focused their descriptions on the previous year or two, and seemingly recalled their conversation, thoughts, and feelings vividly, it is possible that participants forgot or distorted certain

components of their decision-making experiences. Additionally, by virtue of having to recall and recount their experiences retrospectively, participants may have endowed their accounts with a linearity and structure that did not exist, as markedly, in their original lived experience of parenthood decision-making. To this end, Weber and Harvey (1994) contend that retrospective accounts are typically reconstructed by the teller in a linear manner, regardless of the nature of the experience as originally lived. According to van Manen (1990), however, all phenomenological reflections are necessarily retrospective as they recollect events and experiences already passed. Moreover, as the object of inquiry in this study was experiential meanings, bias or imposed linearity that emerged in participants' descriptions was accepted as constitutive of, rather than inimical to, participants' experiences of parenthood decision-making.

A fourth, related limitation has to do with the recruitment criteria requiring that participants be intentionally pregnant, or in active pursuit of a pregnancy, at the time of the first interview. As mentioned previously, seven couples were pregnant at the time of data collection, whereas one couple was still attempting to become pregnant. It is possible that pregnant couples' recollections of their decision-making experiences were favorably colored, in part, by the fact that they were imminently anticipating a first birth. Interesting, however, is the fact that the only difference between the accounts of the pregnant couples, and that of the couple still trying to become pregnant, was the latter wife's claim to have not felt as saliently some of the costs of parenthood as did other participants. This observation seems to run counter to the idea that pregnant couples cast their

decision-making experiences in a more positive light, as they rationalize the irrevocable transition into parenthood. Furthermore, interviewing couples while intentionally pregnant, or while actively trying to achieve a pregnancy, was thought to avoid the oft observed shortcoming of parenthood decision-making research to use intentions as proxies for fertility behaviors. It is nevertheless recognized that whether couples were pregnant, and how far along they were in that process, may have influenced their immediate experience and recollections of parenthood decision-making.

A fifth limitation is the temporality of cohort specific research (Valle King, 1978). That is, while this research generated a thick description of the experiences of participating couples, these descriptions may not accurately predict the family planning issues with which couples will be confronted in the future nor will these descriptions necessarily resonate with the experiences of members of older cohorts. Results are temporally bound, and explicate participating couples' common meanings and experiences of parenthood decision-making, as they were recently lived.

The sixth limitation of this study has to do with the use of an exploratory methodology. Phenomenological research is discovery-oriented. It does not allow for the examination of associations—correlational or causal—between factors, and rather should be used formatively to suggest topics for future research and replication. This methodology was thought best suited to the purpose of the present investigation—namely, to reveal the lived experiences of parenthood decision-making among the couples participating in this study, and the essential

themes by which these individuals experienced and understood their journeys. The investigation of associations and casual relations between variables identified by participants as part of their decision-making experiences—for example, which couple characteristics best predict the successful resolution of ambivalent parenthood plans—constitute areas for future study. Other suggestions for future research are discussed below.

A seventh possible limitation concerns the challenge of fully and accurately elucidating the complexity of human experience. van Manen (1990) notes that all phenomenological inquiry is necessarily reductionistic. Thematic analysis can only allude to the meaning of a lived experience:

> To 'do' hermeneutic phenomenology is to attempt . . . the impossible: to construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld, and yet to remain aware that lived life is always more complex that any explication of meaning can reveal. (van Manen, p. 18)

A final and related limitation concerns my own bias and orientation to the topic. My involvement in this research project was complete, from formulating research questions, through to conducting interviews and analyzing participants' accounts. It is possible that my personal experiences with, and clinical and theoretical orientation to, parenthood decision-making may have influenced my perspective. In particular, these may have sensitized me to the shared and more enhancing components of participants' decision-making experiences. In an effort to minimize this potential influence, I have endeavored to clearly and honestly articulate my own perspective and experience of parenthood decision-making in

the bracketing section. I have furthermore relied heavily on participant feedback to validate the accuracy of my interpretations and the concomitant trustworthiness of these research findings. It is nevertheless the case that my own biases and orientation to the topic; the nature of and experiences lived by the participants; and the interaction of these realities, all contributed to generate a co-constructed, single interpretation of the experience of parenthood decision-making. Indeed, van Manen posits that any one phenomenological description remains *only one* interpretation (1984). Another researcher, bringing his or her own life experiences and presuppositions to the study of parenthood decision-making, might well have elicited different descriptions from participants (for example, accounts focusing more on the experience of conflict and struggle between spouses). Moreover, another researcher, bringing his or her clinical and theoretical lens to the data, might emphasize different understandings and meanings in couples' experiences of deciding whether, and when, to have a child.

Implications for Future Research

This exploratory study contributes intriguing findings on the experience of parenthood decision-making for couples who were initially uncertain about whether they wanted a child or not, and suggests the need for further study into this phenomenon. Future research may confirm and extend upon the findings of this preliminary investigation in a number of ways.

The findings of this study were derived from a small, relatively homogenous sample of couples who were initially undecided about pursuing parenthood. Specifically, the present sample consisted of educated, dual-career

couples, who shared self-proclaimed egalitarian marital relationships and were typically in their early- to mid-thirties. Future research exploring the phenomenon of parenthood decision-making in a larger and more diverse sample could potentially confirm and extend on the themes that emerged in the present study.

Future research efforts could be usefully devoted to investigating parenthood decision-making in more heterogeneous groups of men and women. For example, it would be interesting to explore this experience among younger couples or among couples who share a more traditional orientation to marriage. Additionally, an exploration of this phenomenon among various ethnic groups may further illuminate the role of cultural beliefs and values, as they impact couples' experiences in deciding whether to have children or not. Given the diversity of family structures that exist in today's society, more research is needed on the decision-making experiences of different groups—for example, common-law, and gay and lesbian, couples. Such investigations would be useful in revealing the possible role of cohort and class influences, gendered power, and cultural and lifestyle backgrounds as they may contribute to variations in couples' experiences of parenthood decision-making.

This study used a retrospective phenomenological design, and thus relied on participants' abilities to recall and articulate past experiences. Although participants easily and expressively spoke to their recent experiences in deciding if, and when, to have a child, longitudinal studies could verify and extend upon the present study's results. It would be interesting, for example, to follow couples

from a point of uncertainty or conflict regarding their parenthood plans, through to their decision to have a child or remain childfree. This approach could potentially reveal a more accurate account of couples' decision-making experiences, as they unfolded over a period of months or years. Such an approach could furthermore be extended to explore couples' relative adjustment to parenthood. An intriguing possibility is that couples who more deliberately and thoughtfully plan for parenthood may better adjust to the demands of new parenthood. A longitudinal design could potentially reveal how variations in couples' approaches to parenthood decision-making relate to their personal and marital adjustment after the birth of a child.

Without exception, the couples in this study spoke of appreciating the opportunity to articulate their experiences of parenthood decision-making, together. They described the experiences as being constitutive of both personal and shared components, and, consistent with various researchers' contentions (Daniels & Weingarten, 1982; LaRossa, 1977), felt that their respective accounts were enriched by verification or input from their spouses. Suggested here is the importance of couple interviews in researching parenthood, and other shared decision-making experiences. Despite participants' endorsement of couple interviewing in this study, however, it is possible the presence of participants' spouses may have undermined full and honest accounts of certain aspects of participants' parenthood decision-making experiences. An interesting research focus might thus be to compare spouses' accounts of particular decision-making experiences, derived from individual and couple interviews. Such an approach

could potentially reveal the utility of individual versus couple interviewing, and enrich the present findings.

The experiences of the men and women in this study furthermore suggest that parenthood decision-making is best described as a value-laden, meaning-making endeavor. These participants emphasized the integral experience of grappling with, and reworking their values and perceptions, in their journey toward readiness for parenthood. These findings support the need for more research into how individuals and couples experience and understand their values, beliefs, and perceptions, as they relate to major life decisions. Such explorations could have important theoretical and clinical implications, in suggesting that values and meaning-making may be as, if not more, significant than communication and problem-solving skills in couples' resolution of difficult decision-making endeavors.

Finally, the men and women who participated in this study spoke of their involvement in the research project as having been a positive, normalizing experience. Many participants described their sense of relief in knowing that their difficult path was shared by other couples. They also felt that in revisiting and articulating their stories, they gleaned an even richer understanding of their own and their spouses' experience of parenthood decision-making. Involvement in the study was for many the final piece of a meaning-making journey. These participants' experiences are testimony to the power of phenomenological research for accessing and revealing individuals' experiences and the meaning endowed therein. These experiences furthermore suggest that future research into

couples' parenthood, and other decision-making endeavors, affords participants

the rightful position as the ultimate experts on their lives.

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Appendix B

Telephone Contact Outline

The following information pertains to the nature and parameters of the study. This information will be given to the individuals who have responded to the recruitment advertisement and have contacted the researcher by phone.

Introduction of the Researcher

The researcher, Kristina Towill, is currently enrolled in her second year of doctoral studies in Counselling Psychology at UBC. The researcher is studying parenthood decision-making for her doctoral dissertation. This study is being supervised by Dr. Judith Daniluk of the Department of Counselling Psychology, UBC. Her phone number is 822-5768.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to explore couples' experiences of deciding on the desirability and timing of parenthood in their lives. The principal research question that this study investigates is: "What is the meaning and experience of deciding to start a family for couples who were initially uncertain about having children?"

Eligibility for Participation

Volunteer participants must meet the following criteria in order to be eligible for participation in the study:

(a) Participants will be in a committed, long-term relationship, and will currently be childless,

(b) Participants, or participants' spouses, will have been undecided about whether they wanted children when they originally partnered,

(c) Participants will now actively be pursuing a first pregnancy, or will be pregnant with their first child,

(d) Participants will not be aware of any diagnosed male or female fertility impairment,

(e) Participants, and their spouse, will agree to participate in two confidential, audio-taped interviews over a period of approximately four to six months.

Terms of Involvement

Participants in this study will agree to the following terms of involvement:

(a) discussing with the researcher their experiences of deciding to attempt to have children,

(b) volunteering their time on two separate occasions for a total of approximately four hours. In the first interview, participants and their spouses will be interviewed together about their experiences in deciding to have children. This interview should take approximately two hours. The second interview will be held approximately three to four months after the original interview. The purpose of this interview is to provide participants with an opportunity to review and validate common themes that have emerged out of the data,

(c) committing to having portions of their interview transcriptions being included in the final dissertation document or other future publications.

Appendix C

Recruitment Screening Questions

Volunteer participants responding to the recruitment advertisement will be asked to answer a series of screening questions to ensure their eligibility in the study. These questions will be presented to each spouse after the researcher has reviewed the nature and conditions of the study (see Appendix B).

1. Are you currently in a long-term, committed relationship?

2. Do you have any children by this or any other marriage?

3. When you and your spouse originally partnered, did either of you discuss the issue of parenthood? If so, what was your position on having a child(ren) together? What was your spouse's position?

4. What is your current position on having a child(ren) together? What is your understanding of your spouse's position?

5. Are you currently taking any precautions to prevent a pregnancy, for example, using oral contraceptives?

6. Are you currently trying to get/achieve a pregnancy?

7. Are you aware of any diagnosed fertility problems that you or your spouse have that may impair your efforts to achieve a pregnancy?

8. Are you able and prepared to commit to participating in this study?

Appendix D

<u>Sample Interview Questions</u>

<u>Principal Research Question</u>

What is the meaning and experience of deciding to start a family for couples who were initially undecided about having children?

<u>Principle Interview Question</u>

How do couples decide on the desirability and timing of parenthood in their lives?

<u>General Interview Questions</u>

1. Describe your original position or thoughts on having children. (As an individual and as a couple.)

2. How did you and your spouse *decide* to have children?

3. How has your (and your spouse's) position on having children changed/not changed?

4. How have you experienced this change?

5. How have you understood this change?

6. Has the meaning of parenthood changed in your life? If so, when did you notice this shift happening? What is your understanding of why this change occurred?

7. What are your impressions, thoughts, and feelings about being a parent at this time?

8. How would you define/describe parenthood decision-making?

Appendix E

<u>Study Participant Consent Form</u>

<u>Dialogues About Parenthood Decision-making</u>

This research is being conducted by Kristina Towill as one of the requirements for earning a doctoral degree in Counselling Psychology. The purpose of this study is to understand how couples decide if, and when, to attempt to have children. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or may withdraw from the study at any time.

You have agreed to participate in two audio-taped interviews. Each interview will take approximately 2 hours, with the total time commitment being approximately 4 hours. The purpose of the first interview is to investigate yours' and your spouse's experience of parenthood decision-making. The purpose of the second interview is to provide you with an opportunity to review and confirm the themes that have emerged across participants' accounts of parenthood decision-making. You and your spouse will be asked to read over the common underlying themes to determine whether the themes resonate with your own experiences.

Your identity will remain confidential throughout the study and in subsequent publications. To ensure your anonymity, please choose and indicate a pseudonym below. Any identifying features of your accounts of parenthood decision-making will be changed to protect your privacy. You will be informed of, and asked to approve, any such changes in the second interview. In addition, all data will be kept in a locked cabinet, or under a password on a computer hard drive. Excerpts from your interviews may be included in the final dissertation

Appendix F

Orienting Statement

Couple Interview

The purpose of this research is to better understand how couples experience and make sense of parenthood decision-making. I am particularly interested in how couples decide if, and when, to have children.

Please speak as freely as you wish about your experience with parenthood decision-making. As we proceed with the interview, I may ask you some clarifying questions, or I may ask you to respond to or elaborate on issues that will better assist me in understanding your experiences. I encourage you to discuss those experiences and issues that are most significant to your decision regarding if and when to have children. You are under no obligation to discuss anything that makes you feel uncomfortable, and you are encouraged to ask questions or relay concerns to me at any point throughout the interview.

The principal question to which I would ask you to respond is: **What has been your experience of deciding to start a family?** To begin, you could tell me about the respective positions that each of you held regarding parenthood, upon first partnering. I'd be interested to know your experience and understanding of whether and how your positions have shifted since that time.