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# Childfree and “bingoed”: A relational dialectics theory analysis of meaning creation in online narratives about voluntary childlessness

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## ABSTRACT

We utilize RDT 2.0 to analyze 424 narrative accounts by voluntarily childless (“childfree”) Reddit users of bingo-response interactions to explore how discourse constrains and enables meaning creation. Contrapuntal analysis revealed competing Discourses of Reproductive Normativity (DRN) and Reproductive Autonomy (DRA). We identified both dialogically expansive and contractive discursive practices. The carnivalesque, a communication genre characterized by the sample, enabled discursive closure to occur via single-voiced monologue. Calcification is offered as a discourse marker through which authoritative monologism is accomplished. Discursive interplay occurred via countering, negating, and one discursive hybridization, pet parenthood. We offer the bingo-response interaction as a heuristic framework for advancing future RDT inquiry and critically oriented research about challenging social topics. We describe additional implications and future directions.

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Childfree; bingo; relational dialectics; contrapuntal analysis; online narratives

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), 45.1% of all women in the United States between the ages of 15 and 44 have never had children (Martinez, Daniels, & Febo-Vazquez, 2018), and 6.0% are voluntarily childless, often calling themselves “child-free” (Martinez, Daniels, & Chandra, 2012). As fertility rates continue to decline, childfree families represent a growing share of the population whose needs and challenges must be considered (Martinez et al., 2018). This study addresses voluntary childlessness as an alternative familial form and explores how discourses governing parental status (i.e., whether or not a person has children) create meaning. *Discourses* are “systems of meaning at the level of the broader culture or localized in a given relationship or family” which make the interaction understandable to others (Galvin & Braithwaite, 2014, p. 102). When individuals interact, the interplay of these discourses and the meanings they create occurs.

Such conversations about childfreedom often include *bingos*, broadly defined as any statement made by an out-group member that challenges a person’s own understanding of their beliefs, values, lifestyle, or identity not held in common with the “bingoer,” or

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the person perpetuating the bingo. Bingo boards are common online memes. For instance, members of the asexual community report bingos challenging their asexual identity, such as “You’ve just never had an orgasm” and “You should get your hormones checked,” which might provide an alternative explanation for that person’s lack of desire and uphold normative expectations about sexual desire (Reddit, 2019c). Similarly, polyamorous families report fielding bingos such as “Don’t worry, you’ll find the one someday” and “So you just sleep around then?” (Reddit, 2014). In the current study, bingos are “cliché phrases [said] to convince the childfree that their decision is wrong and that they are shirking their societal duty by not reproducing ... it is called ‘bingo’ because one could fill a bingo card with these responses” (Reddit, 2019a). The interchange that unfolds after a bingo occurs is described here as the *bingo-response interaction*. We utilize relational dialectics theory (RDT 2.0; Baxter, 2011) to generate new insights about what unfolds discursively when others question the voluntarily childless about their parental status. Such questions arise due to perceived violations of the normative expectations that govern family life.

### Normative expectations of family life

Electing to be childfree violates social norms about reproduction that come to define adulthood and constitute the “normative family life cycle” (Pelton & Hertlein, 2011, p. 44). This family life cycle centers heteronormative and *pronatalist* cultural discourses whereby reproduction is encouraged and deemed normal and natural (Gillespie, 2000; Heitlinger, 1991). The cycle moves from the addition of new family members through the empty nesting phase. Several normative assumptions are inherent in the family life cycle, including heterosexuality, partners being of similar ages, entering a relationship in their mid-to-late 20s, having children quickly after the onset of the relationship, the births of children being spaced several years apart, and the relationship being lifelong (Monte, 1989). Socially marginalized childfree families exist at odds with these normative expectations, which fail to address the challenges, stigma, and decisions that childfree couples must face (Park, 2002). To account for these factors, as well as to establish the lives of the childfree as equally meaningful, Pelton and Hertlein (2011) have proposed “the voluntary childfree couple life cycle” (p. 46). This new life cycle addresses key tasks childfree couples must perform, including making the decision to be childfree, managing outside stigma and pressure, crafting an identity without parenthood, building a support system, and leaving a legacy (Pelton & Hertlein, 2011).

Among these challenges are pervasive negative evaluations of the childfree which are motivated by the childfree rejection of normative parental and gender roles (Park, 2002). Childless women have historically been relegated to marginalized roles (e.g., nuns, nannies) that still often involve caring for others’ children (Gillespie, 2003). Yet, voluntary childlessness marks a rejection of motherhood and the presumed innate maternal instincts possessed by all women (Gillespie, 2003). Childfree women are perceived as being less warm and are associated with feelings of envy, disgust, and harm significantly more often than mothers or childless women (Bays, 2017). Childfree women also elicit significantly greater moral outrage (i.e., feelings of anger, contempt, and disgust) and are perceived as being significantly less psychologically fulfilled than mothers with two children (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017). The presence of increased moral

outrage suggests the presence of a violated moral imperative which is perceived to harm the “fabric of society” (Darley & Pittman, 2003, p. 330). Given the challenges the childfree face when negotiating meanings of their parental status, many turn to online communities to discuss these challenges.

### Communication in online childfree communities

The largest publicly accessible online childfree community is a subreddit of the website Reddit, called “/r/childfree,” which has more than 625,000 users (Reddit, 2019a). Reddit is the sixth most visited website in the United States (Alexa, 2019). Subreddit users who create posts must adhere to a series of rules which ban content deemed to be off-topic, uncivil, gross, threatening toward parents or children, or guilty of perpetuating bigots. Users (particularly parents, would-be-parents, and “fencesitters” or people who are unsure about whether to have children) are also asked to refrain from trolling (i.e., sowing discord), making personal attacks, or binging users (Reddit, 2019a). This is done in an effort to create a “supportive outlet for expressing frustration” in a world where pro-natalist cultural discourses make it “socially, absolutely unacceptable to criticize any aspect of pregnancy, children, or parents for any reason” (Reddit, 2019a, n.p.). Put differently, the /r/childfree community is a space where childfree issues can be discussed without interference from outsiders. Examples of frequently discussed /r/childfree topics include definitions of the term “family,” how to opt out of undesired fatherhood, paid parental leave, and pet ownership (an important but contentious topic – some users identify as “pet parents” whereas others identify as “petfree” in addition to identifying as childfree) (Reddit, 2019a).

Many /r/childfree users also post accounts of conversations in which voluntary childlessness was discussed with others not sharing the same views (Hintz & Brown, 2019). In the conversations themselves, accounts of childfreedom are often disbelieved, justifications for choosing childfreedom disregarded, and childfree individuals viewed as deviant (Gillespie, 2000). Thus, the childfree represent a stigmatized community of individuals with shared beliefs and practices who are asked to repeatedly justify and defend their parental status in talk with others (Park, 2002). Users then report accounts of these conversations to the /r/childfree community. Moore (2014) defined three processes by which childfree identity is constructed online. First, *naming* childfreedom meant claiming a label such as “childfree” or “intentional non-parent” to demonstrate distance from the status quo, or “aunt” to remain within it (as it forwards the notion that women must be caregivers) (Hayden, 2011). Second, *negotiating* childfreedom consisted of defining self and other (i.e., positioning oneself against one another and against parents), and revealing ideological underpinnings for being childfree. Thus, we can expect discourses of parental status to be given voice in reports of these conversations to /r/childfree. Common rationales offered for choosing to be childfree include the effects of children on physical and mental health, the environment, sexual relationships, quality of life, and careers and money (Reddit, 2019a). Finally, *enacting* childfreedom involved communicating with others and conveying the importance to others of making intentional reproductive choices (Moore, 2014). For instance, childfree users resist stigma online by emphasizing positive facets of childfree identity such as autonomy, intentionality, and rationality (Morison, Macleod, Lynch, Mijas, & Shivakumar, 2016).

Although many of these conversations with outsiders are reported as having been positive, others are user accounts of having been bingoed and their responses to the bingo. Within the childfree context, the term “bingo” originated after West (2006) created a “breeder bingo” game in which each bingo square lists a predictable response said by “breeders” (i.e., parents perceived to be entitled and irresponsible; Reddit, 2019a) when the topic of childfreedom arises in conversation. Such bingos include “It’s different when it’s your own!” “You’ll change your mind!” and “What if your parents hadn’t had kids?” (West, 2006). Although West (2006) described 20 common bingos, subreddit users offer other bingos in accounts of bingo-response interactions.

Similar to *social confrontation* episodes, a type of communicative interaction where a perceived disruption of an expectation or norm for behavior or idea is communicated to the violator (Newell & Stutman, 1988), the bingo demands an accounting for such violations. Even when the individual begins to offer an account or explanation for their decision or actions, others often feel compelled to challenge the account or uphold the norm (Newell & Stutman, 1988). Although, like social confrontations, the bingo is typically issue driven (Newell & Stutman, 1988), the bingo becomes possible only when an individual’s group membership status is disclosed or becomes known. In this way, bingos characteristically problematize difference. In this context, bingos are prompted by an incorrect assumption about shared normative attitudes toward reproduction. For example, if childfree people are asked when they want to begin having children and reply that they, actually, do not want to have children at all, this does not constitute a bingo. What may follow, “You’re too young to make that decision, you’ll change your mind,” however, does. It is important to note that the bingo itself is not the “do you want to have children?” question, but the arguments that follow individuals’ disclosures of their childfree status as it exists at odds with what is deemed normative. Revealing one’s childfree status opens a person to bingos, where arguments representing larger social discourses promoting parenthood and reproduction can be made. As little is known about what occurs in communicative interactions where dominant and marginalized discourses of parental status are voiced, we use contrapuntal analysis and RDT 2.0 (Baxter, 2011; Suter, 2018) to analyze accounts of discussions in which /r/childfree users report being bingoed and explore how discursive competition unfolds.

## Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) 2.0

RDT 2.0 (Baxter, 2011) has three guiding propositions. First, every *utterance*, “an intertextual social act,” (Suter, 2018, p. 130) exists within a larger *utterance chain* where each utterance is connected to prior and future utterances (Baxter & Norwood, 2015). Put differently, utterances are communicative events where multiple discourses are enacted rather than isolated communicative events, and hence meaning creation is ongoing. Here, each /r/childfree post (or narrative) recounting a bingo-response interaction that we examine constitutes an utterance (Webb & Wang, 2013). Four quadrants of chain “links” exist, which are categorized along temporal (i.e., already- vs. not-yet-spoken utterances) and public/private (i.e., distal vs. proximal) axes (Suter, 2018). Within the utterance chain, individuals may respond to what has already been spoken or what they anticipate will be spoken (i.e., the proximal-already-spoken and proximal-not-yet-spoken

utterances). However, for our purposes, the distal-already-spoken and distal-not-yet-spoken links of the utterance chain are of particular interest. Distal-already-spoken links are cultural discourses which affect a given interaction (Suter, 2018), whereas distal-not-yet-spoken links affect the utterance before it is spoken in response to an expected judgment from others (Scharp & Thomas, 2016).

Utterances are socially embedded in *communication genres*, an understudied component of RDT 2.0 (Baxter, 2011) that represents “historically and culturally specific conventions and ideals ... solutions to communicative problems” (Günthner & Knoblauch, 1995, p. 20). One genre which holds potential for explaining the variety of discursive practices present within /r/childfree is *the carnivalesque*, the suspension of “the ordinary rules, roles, and expectations that organize day-to-day life ... especially hierarchical structure” and where “satire, parody, and laughter are directed toward centripetal discourses, creating openings for alternative discourses to be heard and celebrated” (Baxter, 2011, p. 145). Within the carnivalesque, “the centripetal hierarchy is temporarily decrowned” (Baxter, 2011, p. 34) and the marginalized discourse is made authoritative. This “decrowning” is temporary and fleeting, as are the posts within the /r/childfree subreddit, and one’s participation within the subreddit before returning to daily life, the end of the carnival. In this context, the *carnavalesque spirit* guides an interaction in which dialogically contractive discursive practices are employed (to suppress opportunities for meaning creation; White, 2003), whereas the *carnival* represents the /r/childfree subreddit where accounts of interactions with outsiders are reported to community members. Put differently, the carnivalesque transforms power relations, whereby discourses otherwise dominant in the broader culture become marginalized during the carnival. For example, Clark (2005) described Halloween as a carnivalesque communication event in which normative behavioral expectations (e.g., “don’t talk to strangers!”) became inverted. This “implicates the utterance chain at the intersection of past and present” (Baxter, 2011, p. 126), where meaning is resistant to change and utterances are no longer in conversation with anticipated future judgments.

Second, RDT asserts that battles between competing, often opposing discourses of varying power construct meaning (Baxter & Norwood, 2015). RDT 2.0 calls for scholars to move away from the mere identification of competing discourses, instead encouraging an examination of the role of power in privileging and marginalizing those discourses (Suter & Norwood, 2017; Suter, Baxter, Seurer, & Thomas, 2014). Culturally dominant (or centripetal) discourses (deemed normative, typical, natural) are said to be privileged, whereas marginalized (or centrifugal) discourses (deemed unnatural, off-center, non-normative) are less culturally dominant and often viewed as deviant (Suter, 2018; Suter & Norwood, 2017). Dominant discourses have been called “discourses of community” because they constitute hegemonic assumptions, whereas marginalized discourses have been called “discourses of individualism,” representing individual positions or paradigms that have been silenced (Baxter & Norwood, 2015; Suter et al., 2014). Competing cultural and individual discourses in the meaning creation process represent the interpenetration between the public and private spheres (Baxter, 2011). As noted above, parenthood and the decision to have children represents the dominant discourse (i.e., what is deemed natural, typical, and normative) and is in conflict with childfreedom as a marginalized discourse. Although dominant and marginalized discourses are each likely to appear within the data, the features which constitute each discourse remain unknown. Thus, to

understand which discourses animate meaning about parental status within this sample of online narratives, we ask:

RQ1: What competing discourses, if any, animate meanings of parental status in childfree narratives?

A third guiding proposition is that battling discourses organize meaning in ways that are ever-changing. Competing discourses exist on a spectrum where dialogic (“expansive”) and monologic (“contractive”) talk exist as two extremes, functioning either to “create space for dialogic alternatives” or to “suppress or close down” such possibilities (Baxter, 2011; White, 2003, p. 259). *Monologic single-voicedness*, where two discourses do not co-occur within an utterance (Baxter, 2011), occurs where “one discourse silences, mutes, or distorts alternatives” (Suter, 2018, p. 133). For instance, in an analysis of talk between older adult parents and adult children, contractive (single-voiced) monologue occurred when parents privileged the discourse of independence, silencing the opposing view that adult children are required to care for their parents (Wenzel & Poynter, 2014). In another example, Miller-Day (2004) identified two discourses of autonomy and connection given voice by grandmothers, mothers, and daughters. Monologism occurred when the discourse of connection became authoritative, separateness was deemed intolerable, and autonomy was denied. Dialogically, RDT also asserts that dominant and marginalized discourses interpenetrate to create meaning via *discursive interplay*, which can occur in several forms. First, temporally, discursive interplay may occur across time (diachronic separation) where individuals voice both discourses across time or in varying settings, or within an utterance (synchronic interplay) via *negating* (the direct refutation of a discourse), *countering* (where some elements of the opposing discourse are legitimized, but one’s own discourse is argued to be superior), and *entertaining* (where more than one truth is recognized). Finally, interplay may occur via the transformation or *hybridization* of competing discourses (Scharp & Thomas, 2016; Suter et al., 2014). Within the context of childfreedom, constructions of meaning regarding one’s parental status, then, are continually (re)constituted within the struggle between competing discourses such as the conflict between parenthood (the dominant, centripetal discourse) and childfreedom (the marginalized, centrifugal discourse). As childfreedom and parenthood are not given equal voice in conversations about parental status, using RDT as a guiding framework can aid in the understanding of how these discourses compete. To examine this interplay, we ask:

RQ2: In which ways, if any, do discourses of parental status interpenetrate to create meaning about parental status in childfree narratives?

## Methods

### *Sampling procedures*

To gather narratives of conversations where a childfree individual’s parental status is questioned for this IRB-approved study, we sampled qualitative data from /r/childfree. We selected the subreddit /r/childfree because it is the most utilized, visible, and publicly accessible forum for discussing childfree issues on the Internet. We searched this subreddit during October 2018 using all tenses of the keyword “bingo” (i.e., “bingo” ( $n = 241$ ), “bingoed” ( $n = 187$ ), and “bingoing” ( $n = 22$ )) to identify posts that existed since the beginning of the

subreddit under the flair of “Rant.” Flairs are tools of categorization used to organize information, and each post that exists on the subreddit must use a flair (Reddit, 2019a). We selected the Rant flair because these posts tended to include specific accounts of interactions, whereas other flair types did not. For example, other examples of flairs used on /r/childfree include “Rave,” where users discuss something that made them happy, “Discussion,” where users pose questions, and “Humor,” where images and videos about the childfree lifestyle are distributed. We gathered posts as they appeared on the page after being sorted by relevance, and we conducted our sampling procedures until theoretical saturation was approached. Our initial sample included 500 posts. We selected this number given the varying length of subreddit posts to ensure that we would have enough data to capture the full range of discursive practices relevant to RQ2. We excluded posts if they were photos, videos, or links to external content ( $n = 46$ ), or unrelated to the post author’s own experience (e.g., rants about bingos happening to others, commentary about bingos appearing in media, and general questions posed to the community) ( $n = 30$ ), leaving a final sample of 424 posts.

### ***/r/Childfree demographics***

Users of /r/childfree make anonymous posts, which constitute the unit of analysis for this study, under usernames. Although no demographic data or identifiable information about the specific users included in this study are available, we collected some demographic data from the 2018 /r/Childfree Demographic Survey (see Online Supplemental Table 1). Each year, the /r/childfree subreddit surveys its user base. In 2018, the survey received 1728 responses (Reddit, 2019b), and these demographic data provide context for the qualitative results of this analysis. Among reasons reported for not having children, 45.6% ( $n = 522$ ) of respondents indicated that they simply did not want to raise children, whereas 28.8% ( $n = 330$ ) reported disliking children and 5.7% ( $n = 65$ ) listed tokophobia (i.e., a fear of pregnancy and/or childbirth). Despite hailing from over 200 countries, a majority (61.8%;  $n = 1068$ ) of respondents reported being born in the United States. Respondents largely identified with the “childfree” label, with only 8.1% ( $n = 122$ ) not calling themselves “childfree.” Yet, only 66.3% ( $n = 1145$ ) of respondents do not have or do not ever want children. The remaining 34.7% of respondents reported indecision about whether to have a child (called “fencesitting”), wanting a child, or already having a child. Although 67.2% ( $n = 769$ ) of respondents were raised within Christianity, followed by Atheism (11.1%,  $n = 127$ ) and Agnosticism (11.0%,  $n = 126$ ), only 8.6% ( $n = 98$ ) of respondents reported Christianity as their current faith. Over half now reported identifying as Atheists (54.3%,  $n = 622$ ), and 75.6% ( $n = 866$ ) reported their current level of religious practice as “wholly secular or non-religious.” For respondents with romantic partners, 78.7% ( $n = 566$ ) had a partner who was also childfree. To provide additional demographic information about the sample, we coded each narrative for (a) the location of the bingo (e.g., the doctor’s office, my house, the park) and (b) the identity and relationship of the “bingoer,” the other person in the interaction (e.g., my friend, my mother, the dentist) (see Online Supplemental Tables 2 and 3).<sup>1</sup>

### ***Contrapuntal analysis***

Contrapuntal analysis is a form of critical discourse analysis useful for analyzing “the discursive/ideological struggles of power at play in the talk of relating parties” (Suter, 2018,



p. 128). The “struggle” refers to the “motion” or “discursive competition” between dominant and marginalized discourses (Suter, 2018). The word *contrapuntal* refers to “double-voiced discourses,” which offer multiple perspectives that exist in tandem (Bakhtin, 1984). Baxter (2011) also identifies monologic texts as an important site of critical analysis. Further, RDT 2.0 (Baxter, 2011) emphasizes the importance of the utterances of individuals, not only those of relating parties (Baxter & Norwood, 2015; Suter, 2018). For these reasons, the use of contrapuntal analysis to analyze online narratives is appropriate.

A contrapuntal analysis generally begins by identifying primary dominant and marginalized discourses (Baxter, 2011). As the two coders for these data, we independently conducted a thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006) of half of the dataset ( $n = 212$ ) to identify emergent themes and address RQ1. Next, to triangulate our findings, we then convened to discuss the conceptual categories resulting from the independent thematic analyses and compare our interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although differences in categorical labeling were evident, the emergent themes shared significant similarity. For instance, we both coded instances where children were positioned as leading to a fulfilling life. Although one of us labeled this “pleasure and joy” and the other, “purpose/meaning,” both categories referred to the same concept and were thus united under the heading “Parenthood as the Way to a Fulfilling Life.” We negotiated remaining differences in categorical labeling until we reached agreement on all themes and assigned final labels. We identified six total themes that are detailed in the Results section. We then analyzed these themes against the second half of the dataset ( $n = 212$ ) to ensure that no new themes emerged. This practice is called referential adequacy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Three themes constitute the Discourse of Reproductive Normativity (DRN), whereas the remaining three themes comprise the Discourse of Reproductive Autonomy (DRA).

To address RQ2, we completed the contrapuntal analysis by examining the presence of discursive interplay within the data, to better understand how the DRN and DRA competed for dominance. We analyzed synchronic interplay through the use of discursive markers as a sensitizing device for reviewing the data (Baxter, 2011). For instance, countering, where points of the opposing view are discussed, but the alternative view is positioned as being superior, could be marked by words such as “but,” “although,” and “however” (Baxter, 2011). Likewise, we identified single-voiced monologue by examining utterances not demonstrating negating, countering, or entertaining, where users gave authoritative voice to only one discourse. We approached *unfolding*, a technique for understanding how utterances are responding to and anticipating past/future utterances within the utterance chain, by asking ourselves questions such as “What prior utterances might this utterance be a response to?” and “What subsequent responses are invited by this utterance?” (Baxter, 2011, p. 161). For instance, utterances characterized by single-voiced monologue did not invite a subsequence response (emblematic of dialogically contractive discursive closure) (Baxter, 2011).

We again proceeded by independently analyzing the data for discursive interplay and then engaging in triangulation to resolve any disputes and select exemplars best characterizing the interplay. In total, we enacted five procedures to ensure the validity of these interpretations: investigator triangulation and referential adequacy, an audit trail, negative case analysis, and exemplar identification (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We utilized an audit trail by keeping detailed notes about the analysis process useful for explaining the results of our interpretations. We conducted a negative case analysis by looking for

instances within the data that were not comprised by our existing themes or discourses, and by ensuring accountability for all instances. Finally, we chose exemplars that best illustrated the narrative in addition to the concept.

## Findings

RQ1 asked “What competing discourses, if any, animate meanings of parental status in childfree narratives?” Two discourses emerged that competed for dominance: a Discourse of Reproductive Normativity (DRN) and a Discourse of Reproductive Autonomy (DRA).

### *Discourses of Reproductive Normativity (DRN)*

The DRN invokes several culturally taken-for-granted assumptions about parenthood, including that having children is normal and natural, that young couples should desire parenthood for personal and social reasons, and that the benefits of having children outweigh the potential costs. Those invoking the DRN use the centripetal nature of the DRN to marginalize the DRA via bingos. In doing so, the DRN positions parenthood as a biological inevitability, a moral imperative, and as leading to a fulfilling life.

#### *Parenthood as a biological inevitability*

The DRN positions having children as an inevitability likely to occur regardless of preparations made to prevent it, and as resulting from an innate and biological human desire to produce offspring. One user reported being told that “It’s a biological thing. You’ll automatically want [children]. It’s like a switch” (ID#182). Advanced and permanent reproductive planning is an important part of the childfree lifestyle (Reddit, 2019b). Thus, bingos highlighted the often-unplanned nature of reproduction to contest the intentional nature of childfree non-parenting. Examples include “Accidents happen you know!” (ID#209) and “God might have different plans for you!” (ID#79). The theme of biological inevitability also reflects ideas about evolutionary forces such as the “biological clock” which would cause a desire for children to precipitate. Bingos such as “You’re almost 26, your clock will start ticking soon” (ID#51) or “I think we are going to have a good laugh 10 years from now” (ID#74) represent this implication. These bingos underscore the ways that childfreedom rejects the biological imperative of parenthood.

#### *Parenthood as a moral imperative*

The DRN contends that having children is a moral imperative, as evidenced by negative attributions made about the moral character of the childfree (e.g., “Only a selfish narcissist turns their back on and rejects children” (ID#368)). The DRN highlights the functions of reproduction beyond personal fulfillment, such as fulfilling familial obligations (e.g., “Your family probably wants grandkids. What does your mom say?” (ID#261) and “People have been talking about my supposed eventual procreation since I was in my mid-teens ... everyone is concerned about the family name continuing” (ID#420)) or passing on valuable or desirable characteristics to offspring (e.g., “You’re successful and smart! The world needs more of you! Make babies!” (ID#63)). Most broadly, bingos focused on the necessity of reproduction for sustaining humankind. For example, one user was told that “if everyone thought like me, humanity would die out” (ID#352). Race was also a factor that

motivated bingos. For instance, one user reported being told that she should have children “to continue the White race” (ID#45), whereas another was told that “Black women [are] supposed to have lots of kids” (ID#6). A bingo motivated by a “moral imperative” may be based upon a variety of ideas and philosophies, some of which (e.g., White nationalism, stereotypes about gender and race) would be considered to be immoral by many.

### ***Parenthood as the way to a fulfilling life***

The DRN positions childrearing as an essential component for the life of a fulfilled adult. For instance, “Kids are amazing! They change your life! You won’t be complete without them!” (ID#157) and “You only find true happiness when you have a baby!” (ID#53). Contesting fulfillment also meant voicing concerns about what those without children leave behind. Examples include “Don’t you want to leave your mark on the world and be impactful?” (ID#48) and “Don’t you want someone to carry your legacy?” (ID#357). Fulfillment was also contested by highlighting concern about losing the perceived securities associated with having children. For instance, one childfree user reported being asked “If you don’t have kids, who will take care of you when you are older?” (ID#71). Together, these bingos contest whether the lives of childfree people are complete without children and highlight a concern for the wellbeing of those who choose not to reproduce.

### ***Discourse of Reproductive Autonomy (DRA)***

Another discourse, the DRA, also creates meaning about the decision not to have children by countering the culturally dominant discourse of the DRN. Instead, the DRA presents an alternate system of meaning for understanding what it means to be childfree, resisting the DRN. The DRA argues that individuals may decide whether to have children, make reproductive preparations accordingly, and work to build fulfilling lives without children.

### ***Childfreedom as intentional***

The DRA asserts that emphasizing the “innate” desires shared by all humans discounts the role of personal autonomy. The DRA questions biological inevitability, instead positioning choosing not to have children as an intentional decision for which preparations are required. Preparations included reproductive planning (e.g., “I’m using birth control and protection and eventually having my tubes removed” (ID#2)) and selecting a childfree partner (e.g., “Mr. Right will come already snipped” (ID#121)). The DRA also challenges claims about parenthood as a biological inevitability by highlighting personal characteristics perceived as being incompatible with parenthood. For instance, “I know I wouldn’t make a good mother, and I feel like that should be a great reason to decide to not have kids!” (ID#215). Others focused on undesirable genetic traits that they did not want to pass on to potential offspring. Despite being predisposed to pass on a debilitating genetic disorder, one user reported her frustration after being encouraged to have children anyway, recalling, “If you don’t know what Huntington’s Disease (HD) is, think of Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s and ALS combined. Any child of a parent with HD has a 50% risk of getting it themselves. Why would I condemn a child to that?!” (ID#94). For this user, electing not to have children was an intentional action taken to prevent the transmission of an inheritable illness.

### ***Childfreedom as a personal decision***

The DRA also counters the DRN by positioning the decision about whether to have children not as an obligation to others, but as a personal decision. As one user plainly stated, “[It’s] my choice, and my choice is no” (ID#22). Another proclaimed, “It’s my body, my life, and my choice. No one else’s” (ID#268). After being asked what her husband thought of her decision to be childfree, another user similarly explained, “Thankfully for me, other people’s opinions have no bearing on my decision to be childfree” (ID#259). The DRA responded to the dominant discourse positioning childrearing as a relational or communal obligation by emphasizing the personal nature of that decision.

### ***Childfreedom as fulfillment***

The DRA challenges the DRN notion that parenthood is essential to fulfill an individual’s life by highlighting the alternative ways that one can achieve fulfillment without children. For instance, when asked “Don’t you want to leave your mark on the world and be impactful?” one user responded by “[laying] out my charity plans, our travel plans, kick-ass retirement plans and all of the awesome shit we’ll be able to do without kids around” (ID#82). Others resisted the notion of having children as necessary for leading a complete life: “Having kids doesn’t complete you, you are a whole person already. I’m not an invalid woman or human because I won’t breed” (ID#116). By arguing that an adult life could be fulfilling without children, the DRA challenged the DRN, which positioned parenthood as the epitome of fulfillment.

### ***Centripetal – centrifugal struggle***

RQ2 asked, “In which ways, if any, do discourses of parental status interpenetrate to create meaning about parental status in childfree narratives?” Results indicate that both single-voiced monologue, a contractive enactment of the centripetal–centrifugal struggle where interpenetration was precluded, and dialogic discursive struggle, where interplay occurred, were represented within the sample. Single-voiced monologism was accomplished via calcification, whereas discursive interplay was accomplished via synchronic interplay (i.e., negating and countering) and hybridization (Baxter, 2011).

### ***Single-voiced monologue***

Monologic single-voicedness appeared within the sample where the marginalized DRA became authoritative and temporarily silenced the dominant DRN. Dialogically contractive monologue was facilitated by the carnivalesque spirit. Although typically described in dialogically expansive terms, communication genres may also be dialogically contractive, where the space for alternative perspectives is closed (Bakhtin, 1986). Carnavalesque *monologue* occurs here when users operating within the distal-not-yet-spoken link of the utterance chain produce narratives/utterances which disregard the superaddressee, a hypothetical interactant who may impose a normative evaluation (Baxter, 2011). Monologism was facilitated by /r/childfree, which upends normative expectations for relating, privileges the DRA, and in which the carnivalesque spirit abounds (Baxter, 2011, p. 146). As subreddit users are banned from creating posts deemed “disrespectful” which question or criticize childfree beliefs or practices (Reddit, 2019a), the potential for a normative evaluation and affecting the production of utterances and invocation of

discourses (i.e., recounts of the bingo-response interaction by users) is thereby removed. Thus, users posting to the /r/childfree subreddit are freed from the restraint and power of the dominant discourse in the carnival, this online space. We argue that the carnivalesque is a genre which provides opportunity for monologic calcification, which we conceptualize as a controllable discursive marker for reclaiming discursive power by silencing the DRN.

### Calcification

Calcification occurs where meaning creation encounters “stagnation ... inflexibility, if not rigidity” (Baxter, 2011, p. 126). In these cases, the marginalized discourse becomes an authoritative discourse, where the DRN is “subvert[ed], obscure[ed], and deni[ed]” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 61), acting to reclaim discursive power. In the spirit of carnivalism, some /r/childfree users gave voice only to the DRA in response to bingos, silencing the DRN and calcifying meaning creation. Several practices of discursive closure are offered: (a) using dark humor and laughter, (b) refusing to engage, and (c) impersonation.

In some cases, the DRN was temporarily silenced, with the DRA instead positioned as dominant and meaning calcified, channeling the carnivalesque spirit through the use of dark humor and laughter or parodying to deny the DRN (Baxter, 2011). The carnivalesque spirit is evidenced, in part, by the “bingo,” again referring to an interactional game of sorts to be enjoyed by community members, which parodies and satirizes outsiders (West, 2006). For instance, while eating with a group of friends, one childfree user who was asked “What if there’s an accident!?” by a male friend, explained how they responded:

Because I am a smartass, I go with jazz hands. “Aboooortion! Did it once, will do it again!” Dude’s smile just drops and he kind of chokes. It’s then that my husband enters in and starts cracking jokes about how the abortion was a bit pricy and it’d be better if we could find some stairs to push me down next time. Bingo denied, bro. (ID#155)

In this example, the user utilizes dark humor and laughter to silence the DRN. Bakhtin (1984) refers to a similar type of parody as a communicative resource, the *rogue*, where, in the spirit of playfulness, the speaker produces a particular view of the dominant discourse to ridicule it. However, in this case, this user is not calling up notions of the DRN to question its legitimacy (which would constitute “negating,” one form of synchronic interplay), but instead producing an exaggerated distortion of their *own* discursive position to mock the DRN, the biologically inevitable view of reproduction. Such utterances exist at both the distal-already-spoken link (as cultural discourse is given voice in talk) and the proximal-not-yet-spoken link (where the user anticipates that such talk will be perceived as mockery) of the utterance chain (Baxter, 2011).

In another example of calcification, another user giving authoritative voice to the DRA refused to engage in talk about differing views altogether. After fielding a series of insults about her childfree status from a fellow college student during a seminar, one user explained to the subreddit, “No guys, I didn’t respond to everything she said. I don’t care what she thinks or says ... and I feel like it’s useless to pick a fight with brainwashed wanna-be-mombie” (ID#297). This constitutes what Deetz (1992) calls *pacification*, whereby it is considered futile to engage in talk about differences and, consequently, “competing discourses are pacified and thereby discursively stripped of their force” (Baxter, 2011, p. 172). This user’s unwillingness to engage in talk which addresses difference

further illustrates the carnivalesque spirit of the interaction, where usual expectations for behavior are disregarded.

In a final example, one childfree user engaged in an impersonation of the DRN, invoking the language of infertility to prevent the interpenetration of competing discourses (where giving voice to the DRA would beget bingos). This user, who decided to tell coworkers at a new job that she was infertile explains, “I decided to nip the whole ‘So when are you having kids?’ problem in the bud. I lied and told everyone that I was infertile. I’m going to Google reasons for infertility so that I can shut down binging” (ID#423). Here, by ascribing her childlessness to infertility, she gave voice only to the DRN to circumvent discursive struggle. Park (2002) calls this “identity substitution,” whereby an individual may substitute a stigmatized identity (e.g., being childfree) for a less stigmatized identity (e.g., being infertile) to make others “back off” without challenging norms which contribute to stigma (Park, 2002, p. 33). Bakhtin (1984) describes a similar communicative resource, the *clown*, who maliciously impersonates a given discourse to challenge it. In this case, however, impersonation is used not to challenge the DRN, but to appear as though one coheres to it and to silence alternative perspectives. Doing so also enables the user to disregard the superaddressee – by impersonating the DRN, the possibility for a negative normative evaluation is reduced unless the deceit is discovered.

These examples are discursive practices employed to give authoritative voice to one discourse to silence alternative perspectives. This silencing can be conceptualized as a form of disregard (Moore, 2017), one way in which discursive power may be reclaimed. Through the silencing of the DRN, in which the pronatalist impossibility of childfreedom is circulated and childfree views disregarded (Gillespie, 2000), granted by the “inversion event,” the carnival (Baxter, 2011), childfree users were free to retributively disregard and marginalize the DRN.

### *Synchronic interplay*

In contrast to single-voiced monologue, some narratives displayed synchronic interplay, where childfree users gave voice to both the DRN and DRA for the purposes of negating, countering, or hybridizing the dominant DRN.

### *Negating*

Negating occurred in this sample when childfree users mentioned elements of the DRN to question its legitimacy and instead center the DRA. Given that users in this /r/childfree sample were recounting instances of being binged, users in this sample would negate the assumptions of the dominant DRN and instead center the marginalized DRA. For example, after being asked, “What if the perfect woman comes along and wants kids?” One user responded, “She wouldn’t be the perfect woman. I wouldn’t sleep with someone who wanted kids. It’s best to part ways, no compromising on kids” (ID#186). In this example, this user is rejecting the assumption of the DRN that one might elect to have children to fulfill the familial roles of others, such as one’s spouse. They point out the intentional measures taken to select a partner who shares the same views about children, instead centering DRA notions of intentionality. Morison et al. (2016) suggest that emphasizing the positive facets of one’s identity (e.g., reproductive intentionality and autonomy) may function as a practice of resistance. In another example, after telling a colleague about their childfree status, “I don’t plan to have children,” one user

was told, “Oh it just happens. I said that too but here I am” and responded, “No, it doesn’t just happen. There are very specific things you have to do and not do in order to have children” (ID#249). Here, the user is responding to the assumption of the DRN that having children is inevitable, rejecting it, and instead asserting that having children is an intentional decision which involves reproductive planning, centering the DRA.

### **Countering**

Countering occurred in this sample when childfree users acknowledged the legitimacy of some components of the DRN, but still ultimately centered the DRA. Most often, countering occurred when childfree users raised the topic of adoption as a hypothetical alternative to having biological children. For instance, while visiting her mother, one user reported being told, “Maybe someday you’ll change your mind,” and responding, “While I’m willing to allow the slim possibility that we might want to adopt a kid someday in the future, there are very few things in life that I’m sure of, but I think this is one of them” (ID#406). This user granted limited legitimacy to the prospect that they might change their mind in the future, that parenthood might be an inevitability (i.e., the DRN), while still centering the DRA. In this way, users were acknowledging that they may one day feel compelled to have children while centering the DRA, which asserts that one could elect to have children intentionally via adoption. For the childfree, granting limited legitimacy to the DRN means acknowledging the possibility that they may later become parents and forwarding the notion that claims about childfreedom are not to be believed (Gillespie, 2000). Thus, users may be reluctant to give voice to the DRN when doing so forwards pronatalist assumptions which challenge the legitimacy of the DRA.

### **Hybridization**

Hybridization occurs where discourses no longer compete for dominance; instead, the meaning-making process can result from a transformation or “hybrid” of existing discourses (Baxter, 2011). One instance of discursive hybridization occurred in this sample, where the DRN and DRA were positioned as complementary rather than competing for dominance. In particular, childfree users gave voice to the DRN through a discussion of pet parenthood (Volsche, 2018), whereby electing to have a “fur baby” forwarded reproductive normativity by positioning pet parenthood as a form of caregiving for a dependent other (i.e., acknowledging that pet parenthood can be fulfilling and that the familial roles of others can be fulfilled via titles such as “pet grandparent”). Yet, they voiced childfreedom as an intentional decision by affirming the autonomous nature of electing to adopt a pet and the intentionality of choosing pet parenthood. For instance, when being asked by her mother-in-law when she would “give her a grandbaby,” one user responded, “Nope, no way. I am not on that baby train. Furbabies are more my speed” (ID#153).

Another user reported that her mother positioned pet parenthood as evidence of her husband’s capacity to care for a baby, “So, my mom came to visit ... [She said] ‘Your [partner] would be such a great dad, look how loving he is with your dogs!’” (ID#195). This suggests that, although pet parenthood is granted limited legitimacy, it is still not viewed as being equivalent to human parenthood. In these examples, the DRN and DRA are positioned as being complementary, a transformative discursive practice

accomplished by affirming one's own role as a caregiver in the absence of children (i.e., that it is normal to care for a dependent other), thereby potentially avoiding negative personal attributions from others by failing to cohere to this moral imperative. Moore (2014) similarly found that childfree women sometimes identified themselves as "aunts" to remain within the dominant discourse positioning women as caregivers. Here, "pet parenthood" may act as a discursive practice for remaining within the dominant DRN while retaining tenets of reproductive autonomy and intentionality.

## Discussion

Guided by RDT 2.0 (Baxter, 2011), this study contributes to a growing body of critically inflected interpersonal and family communication (CIFC) scholarship (Moore, 2016; Moore & Manning, 2019; Suter, 2016, 2018) by conceptualizing communication about reproduction as being embedded within cultural discourses, ideologies, and systems of power. RDT enabled an exploration of how meanings of parental status are discursively constructed in 424 online narrative accounts of "bingos," or conversations where an individual's childfree status is questioned. RDT also enabled the identification of two overarching discourses, the DRN and the DRA. The dominant DRN forwards pronatalism by positioning parenthood as a biological inevitability, a moral imperative, and as leading to a fulfilling life. The marginalized DRA, instead, discursively positions childfreedom as an intentional and personal decision, which itself begets fulfillment. In examining user accounts of bingo-response interactions with others reported to the /r/childfree subreddit, both single-voiced monologue and discursive interplay were present. Single-voiced monologue was accomplished via three discursive practices of calcification: (a) using dark humor and laughter, (b) refusing to engage, and (c) impersonation. Here, facilitated by the carnivalesque, the DRA was given authoritative voice to temporarily silence the DRN in a fleeting reclamation of discursive power. Discursive interplay was accomplished via negating and countering, and one discursive hybrid (pet parenthood) was enacted to position competing discourses as complementary.

In contrast to other RDT studies, which focus primarily on discursive interplay and the *creation* of meaning, our findings underscore ways in which single-voiced monologue and calcification (what we propose as a discourse marker for single-voiced monologue) can act as a means for (temporarily) *halting* meaning creation. The presence of single-voiced monologue was indicated, in part, by the absence of entertaining, one form of synchronic interplay in which multiple discursive alternatives are given equal voice. The presence of single-voiced monologue within the sample suggests that the calcification of meaning may function as a practice for halting the discursive jockeying for power, through which the marginalized discourse is privileged in the online community and the dominant discourse is temporarily silenced. By examining the discursive competition between the DRN and DRA, we could better understand how this marginalized population manage bingos which contest their reproductive choices and identities. Future research could continue to examine monologic sites and other dialogically contractive discursive practices and examine the transformative potential of communicative sites in which the marginalized discourse is, or becomes, dominant.

Further, our findings outline one instance in which the carnivalesque spirit, a type of communication genre which has been understudied (Baxter, 2011), catalyzes the



temporary silencing of the dominant discourse. This is novel, as the carnivalesque has typically been characterized as a dialogically expansive genre. Centering communication genre within the analysis enabled some discussion not only of how discourses interpenetrate (or not), but *why* this occurs. Although discussions of family planning and voluntary childlessness are typically considered taboo (Rauscher & Durham, 2015), the bingo-response interaction invokes the carnivalesque spirit in which talk, and reports of talk, are uninhibited. Given that childfreedom can be conceptualized as a discourse-dependent alternative familial form which requires defending to gain legitimacy (Galvin, 2006), the carnival provided by the /r/childfree community offers respite from the discursive struggle of normative evaluation and obligations to produce utterances which consider the super-addressee. Put differently, this study illuminates how discourse can both constrain and enable discursive interpenetration in an effort to define and defend what it means to be a family in the absence of children (Galvin & Braithwaite, 2014). Future critically inflected RDT 2.0 research should continue to explore the discursive potential (expansive and contractive) of this communication genre, and other communication genres such as narrative stories and relationship rituals (Baxter, 2011), as a way of further embedding utterances within broader historical and social contexts (Suter, 2016).

### ***Theorizing about motherhood and morality***

An abundance of RDT studies (e.g., Cronin-Fisher & Parcell, 2019; Scharp & Thomas, 2017; Suter, Seurer, Webb, Grewe, & Koenig Kellas, 2015) have examined meaning creation about motherhood. Given this literature, one might be prompted to ask: What do these studies have in common and how do we proceed? These studies suggest that talk about motherhood often represents a discursive struggle of normative evaluation (Baxter, 2011), as they explore meaning creation in cases where women contradict cultural expectations for idealized forms of motherhood, often due to mismatches between conceptualizations of one's own family or role and normative expectations. For example, this mismatch may stem from the composition of a family such as queer parenthood (Suter et al., 2015), adopted or foster children (Suter et al., 2014), or dissonance between one's own feelings toward a child and what might be deemed normative (e.g., dissatisfaction in motherhood or post-partum depression; Cronin-Fisher & Parcell, 2019; Scharp & Thomas, 2017). This study extends this body of work by examining (non)parenthood, including childfree men, and challenging the requisite nature of children in family life.

In viewing discourses of (non)motherhood as beholden to normative evaluation, morality is centered. This means that talk is interpreted given "a system of implicit or explicit values" (e.g., what it means to be a "good" mother) in an effort to "preserve moral codes" (Waldron & Kelley, 2017, p. 236). We may reinterpret the bingo (e.g., "You'll change your mind when you are older!"), for example, as a sensemaking device employed to restore moral order after a perceived violation occurs during a bingo-response interaction (Waldron & Kelley, 2017). We contend that deciding whether to become a parent is a moral issue, and reproduction is viewed as a moral imperative. An individual's parental status, then, holds implications for how others perceive their values and morals. Future analyses could utilize RDT and negotiated morality theory (NMT; Waldron & Kelley, 2017) together to advance theorizing in this area. NMT views moral development as being constituted through communication and asks us to attend to the ways in which

individuals “negotiate, define, and enact their moral commitments” (p. 235). NMT also views moral conversations as being productive and conducive to growth and positive relationships. However, these findings suggest that conversations about moral issues also hold the potential for fostering polarization and animosity between interactants. For example, childfree users reported being negatively evaluated by others (e.g., called selfish) and were viewed as shirking reproductive obligations to fulfill the roles of others (Park, 2002).

Further, our findings question an implicit assumption held by NMT that there is a particular shared moral code to which individuals must orient (Waldron & Kelley, 2017), instead asserting that marginalization and power shape perceptions of morality. Although other RDT analyses have noted morality as a discursive feature in interactions which discuss motherhood (e.g., Suter et al., 2015), these findings question whether equal moral footing can be assumed and what occurs discursively when assumptions fall away. Here, the DRN and DRA competed for dominance, and in doing so, revealed a series of moral strongholds which those with the opposing view deemed insufficient. The same fervent desire for adherence to one’s own morals motivated decision-making and discursive competition about the meaning of parenthood for relating parties. Future RDT studies could work to understand how moral underpinnings drive discursive competition by integrating NMT. Future researchers may also examine the ways in which alternative familial discourses are enacted to resist normative moral ideals (Waldron & Kelley, 2017). Detailed descriptions of marginalized discourses made dominant within other online carnivals could prove useful points of intervention, particularly for communities in which radical beliefs and polarization exist (e.g., the involuntarily celibate or “incel” community).

### ***The bingo as a heuristic tool***

The “bingo” itself is a macro-level discourse marker with heuristic value (Suter et al., 2015). Baxter (2011) notes that heuristic frameworks are useful because they “assist us in seeing things in ways different from what would otherwise be the case” (p. 7). Features of the bingo-response interaction direct our attention to specific discursive features and their struggle. These findings suggest that discursive struggles of normative evaluation exist not only at the “distal-not-yet-spoken” link of the utterance chain (what we might call the “anticipated normative evaluation”; Baxter, 2011, p. 113), but at the “distal-already-spoken” link (the communicated normative evaluation), as bingos are normative evaluations given voice by one’s immediate conversational partner. Bingos are a type of conversation recognized across contexts which represent a part of the utterance chain, a predictable and mutually understood series of likely normative evaluations that comprise the dominant discourse.

Bingos, then, provide additional warrant to the conceptualization of the dominant discourse as being dominant because the term “bingo” was invoked to convey that one could play and win a game of “BINGO” with multiple conversational partners using a board with each normative evaluation (e.g., “You’re too young to say that you don’t want children,” “You just haven’t met the right person yet”) representing one box (Reddit, 2019b; West, 2006). By explicating the functions of the bingo in this context, we couple the bingo and RDT in an effort to extend future critically inflected RDT work that explores issues

of power, lived experiences of marginalization, and discursive competition in socially challenging contexts. Exploring the “bingo” phenomenon using RDT deepens our understanding of the culturally embedded (and potentially fraught) meanings of an individual’s parental status created in these interactions, and the ways in which discourse can constrain and enable meaning creation.

Although most RDT 2.0 studies to date have utilized interview data (some exceptions utilize focus groups or online data), Baxter (2011) has called for more work analyzing conversational data and sequences. The bingo-response interaction, a type of social confrontation episode, might be further reinterpreted by RDT to accomplish this aim. RDT 2.0 studies have often centered such confrontations (also called “antagonistic struggles” or “moral conflict[s],” where speakers have opposing perspectives; Baxter, 2011, p. 131) as the site of analysis (e.g., Suter et al., 2015). Antagonistic struggles are understudied, likely due to an “overreliance on interview data” (Baxter, 2011, p. 132). Thus the bingo (and complementary online sources) is amenable to the framework established by RDT.

Future research could explore such interactions by capturing entire conversations and examining the path of the conversation from initiation through resolution. Bingos could be further examined using the social confrontation episode framework (see Newell & Stutman, 1988) or in terms of the *account* sequences that comprise them (see Braaten, Cody, & DeTienne, 1993; Koenig Kellas & Suter, 2012). McLaughlin, Cody, and Rosenstein (1983) described conversational sequences between strangers following an “offense,” which could be related to an individual’s occupation, behavior, beliefs, or personal identity. They noted a recurring conversational sequence, whereby an offense was noted, a reproach was made, an account was offered, and an evaluation of the account followed. Social confrontations and account sequences each offer one path forward for examining conversational paths via RDT 2.0, and each is theoretically linked to evaluative outcomes for the interaction.

## Limitations and future directions

Although this study offers a novel contribution to the RDT and childfree literature, there are several limitations. First, although demographic data are available for the entire subreddit, we used a sample of anonymous online narratives and thus, no demographic data for the users represented in the sample are available. Future studies might seek to capture a variety of parental statuses (e.g., parent, fencesitter, childfree person) to examine differences in meaning construction appearing across groups. Second, these data are written from the perspective of the childfree user, and thus, no dyadic data were captured. Further, we cannot assess the extent to which the interactions reported on the /r/childfree subreddit are reflective of face-to-face discussions. Using a rich data source to examine the experiences of the dyad would further illuminate how meaning is constructed within these interactions.

Third, it is important to note that there is a possibility that monologic data, where only one discourse is given voice, may represent diachronic separation. Baxter (2011) does note that “it is impossible to differentiate [diachronic separation] from single-voiced monologue, because at any given point in time, one discourse is dominant” (p. 127). In this context, the nature of the bingo itself creates a space for the forever childfree to voice those opinions, while also creating space for the questioning of that belief. The proclamation of one’s childfree beliefs can later be constraining and require negotiating facework to

reposition one's reproductive identity (Moore, 2018). Although these users may later invoke the dominant discourse, our lack of longitudinal data makes it impossible to determine whether diachronic separation occurs (or has the potential to occur later) in these cases. Thus, our data are illustrative of meaning calcification occurring at one point in time, where users give monologic voice to the otherwise marginalized DRA, which is privileged as dominant. Future research should continue to examine the potential functionality of monologism and consider how these discursively constructed meanings work to both free and constrain meaning.

Fourth, regarding discursive interplay, the majority presence of narratives representing negating and the overall dearth of countering and entertaining is likely a product of this sample, which came from the /r/childfree subreddit. Although other small childfree subreddits do exist, these communities were not included because they either: (a) are offshoots of /r/childfree, (b) have substantially smaller followings than /r/childfree, or (c) are subreddits where users do not typically post narratives of interactions they have had with others. Other subreddits, such as /r/fencesitters, which address indecision regarding whether to have children, also exist. Entertaining may have been vocalized more by fencesitters than the staunchly childfree. However, as /r/fencesitters was not the primary source of the data, instances of entertaining may have been limited in this way. Sampling under the flair of "Rant," although necessary to capture specific information about the bingos occurring in this context, may have limited the presence of countering and entertaining within the sample, as these interactions tended to be confrontational in tone. Despite these limitations, this study has produced novel theoretical insights, illustrated the potential for linking critical discourse and content analyses, and offered future directions to advance the study of discursive interplay and meaning creation using RDT.

## Conclusion

This study explicates the features of two discourses which are given voice by interactants and function both to enable and constrain meaning creation about parental status in online narratives of voluntary childlessness. This study extends RDT by explicating the potential (dys)functionality of dialogically contractive practices and examining a site in which marginalized discourses become privileged as dominant. These findings illuminate the potential for the bingo-response interaction to be utilized as a heuristic tool to guide future inquiry into socially challenging contexts, interactions which discuss areas of difference, and accounts of those interactions. Future research could center monologue and communication genre as sites of further RDT inquiry, problematize inquiry which regards normative morality as a universal regulatory ideal to be communicatively enforced, and continue to explicate features of the bingo-response interaction across contexts. Doing so will forward the CIFIC project by facilitating inquiry into issues of power, ideology, and the lived experience of marginalized groups.

## Notes

1. Initial codes were generated after a review of a subset of the data and refined through the coding process. If multiple codes for location or person were present in a single post (e.g., "my brother and my grandmother both binged me"), both categories were coded for that

post, and these instances are noted in Online Supplemental Tables 2 and 3. The entire sample ( $n = 424$ ) was utilized for this coding. Initially, a sample of 40 posts were selected using a random number generator. We then individually coded each post, participating in two total rounds of coding with 40 posts each for a total of 80 posts (constituting 18.8% of the total sample). Disputes were identified and resolved until agreement was reached on all codes. This process was repeated (two times) until reliabilities of 0.69 or greater were reached on all codes (Krippendorff, 2018). Final KALPHA reliabilities were  $\alpha = 1.00$  for the location of the bingo and  $\alpha = .91$  for the identity of the other person in the conversation. We then each independently coded half of the remaining posts ( $n = 344$  total posts remaining, each coder coding  $n = 172$ ) equally. Frequency data were tabulated using Hayes and Krippendorff's (2007) KALPHA macro.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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