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## Examining a non-conformist choice: The decision-making process toward being childfree couples

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### ABSTRACT

The norm of parenthood in a heteronormative union expects individuals to become parents as a preordained milestone in their life-course. This norm emanates from the ideology of pronatalism that promotes procreation for the well-being of the individual, family and society. The present paper is set against varying yet converging manifestations of pronatalism in India and Canada, as evident in the dominant discourses on family forms, and policies that reinforce the hegemony of the heteronormative nuclear family. Drawing on the conjoint narratives of thirty-six childfree couples based in cities of India and Canada, we explore the diverse processes that ultimately result in the decision to forego parenthood. The cross-cultural similarities and dissimilarities among various decision making pathways in turn reveal the complex interplay between individual agency and the overarching pronatalist habitus. This interpretation of the decision-making process to forego parenthood contributes to an understanding of non-conformist choices that are made.

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## Introduction

The idea of a heteronormative marital and procreative family constitutes the heart of public discourse as well as our social imagination on family configurations. This discourse and social imagination, emanates from varied processes of socialization followed across cultures entailing a “natural” or “normative” progression of life. This refers to a standardized life-course wherein norms regulate the timing and sequencing of prominent life events (White 1998; Uhlenberg and Mueller 2003). These life events chronologically involve acquiring an appropriate level of education, finding a job, marrying, and having kid(s).<sup>1</sup> Until recently, this presumed “natural” progression was almost ubiquitous for men. However, with the increasing number of women acquiring higher education and entering the workforce, it is becoming a normative requirement for women as well. In the past, the transition to adulthood for women was determined by the departure from their parent’s home after marriage, and to start a family (Carroll 2012; Ramasubramanian and Jain 2009). Now, it also entails the expectation of joining the labour force prior to, or along with entering married life. The corresponding changes in men’s life course should have been increased participation in domestic labour, which is encouraged in rhetoric, but remains a delusion as is evident in everyday experiences as

well as the statistics (Ramasubramanian and Jain 2009; Phillips 2014). Thus, the life-course of men and women in general reflects the infusion of changes in the prescriptive natural progression. These changes might delay the realization of certain prescriptive life-stages as men and women are in larger numbers marrying and starting families later, due to the time lag in achieving the educational, occupational and financial goals to which they aspired. Yet, if they eventually embrace parenthood, they are still perceived to be following the normative life-course (Carroll 2012).

A growing number of individuals are remaining unmarried and/or without children for a substantial part of their lives (Notkin 2014). For those who are not in a heteronormative union, having no children is socially desirable in most societies, though for those who are indeed in such unions, transitioning to parenthood is the norm. Referring to the fertility rates among American women according to the US census of 2010, Notkin (2014: xiv) asserts, “Never before have more women lived longer before having their first child or remained childless at the end of their fertility.” A similar trend of increasing childlessness, particularly among younger cohorts, has been indicated by several studies conducted across different parts of the world (Rowland 2007; Gobbi 2013; Miettinen et al. 2015). Despite this growing trend of childlessness (though it can be a mix of voluntary and involuntary factors) particularly in developed countries, the responses that individuals (usually women) invariably receive on revealing their choice not to procreate are filled with gestures, words and undertones of implausibility, contempt and rejection (Basten 2009; Kelly 2009). This stigmatization stems from the norm of procreation, also known as pronatalism, which most vigorously applies to heteronormative couples (Carroll 2012; Blackstone and Stewart 2012). We examine the process through which couples in a heteronormative union overcome the internalized norm of procreation, and instead chose to forego parenthood.

Within the overarching pronatalism, we have chosen the two socio-cultural milieus of India and Canada as locales for achieving a greater understanding of the varying systems of meaning within which people think, feel and act. By using a cross-cultural perspective, we attempt to elucidate the role of diverse cultural contexts in the construction of an identical choice. We first discuss the pronatalist habitus to delineate the universal preponderance of the norm to procreate. Then we briefly review the fertility trends and corresponding family forms and policies in the two nations. This facilitates in contextualizing the data collected through the joint narratives of self-reported childfree couples in these countries. The analysis of the data and a narrative approach of interpretation enabled in identifying various decision-making pathways, and reconstruction of the decision making process of the participants to forego parenthood.

## **Unraveling pronatalism: The overarching context**

Pronatalist values are cultural universals, since parenthood is the normative expectation across cultures, though the degree of pronatalism may vary in different societies (Veevers 1980; Carroll 2012). Although it is a complex exercise to define pronatalism in precise terms, Peck and Senderowitz (1974:2) have put it as, “simply and literally pronatalism refers to any attitude or policy that is ‘pro-birth’ that encourages reproduction that exalts the role of parenthood.” In tracing the history of pronatalism, Carroll (2012) suggests that

historically, the pursuit of survival and power has been driving pronatalist values across cultures. At a time when epidemics, wars, and high mortality rates necessitated higher birth rates to replace population losses, high fertility ensured the survival of the group, while the increasing size of the group meant more power in a labour intensive agrarian system. Mortality rates came down drastically through socio-economic advancement (although uneven and at varying time-periods in different societies), and medical discoveries and technologies, in the last two centuries. Also, the development of modern contraceptives offered a means to separate sexual activity from reproduction, and is no longer attached to having offspring. Despite this, childbearing remains an invariable milestone for most, and very few ponder if parenthood is desirable or that it befits their lifestyle (Carroll 2012).

Most people have a desire to procreate which is not necessarily instinctive, as there are many who choose not to procreate (Veenhoven 1974). The norm to procreate has been primarily preserved and perpetuated by the social institutions of marriage and family, with other institutions such as religion, education, economy, health, and jurisprudence, encouraging their continuance. There are myriad ways in which these institutions foster the norm of pronatalism within marriage and family. In the past, major religions, for instance, advocated increasing the sizes of their congregations and, thus, their outreach by resorting to religious preaching that encouraged reproduction and forbade birth control, in the form of prohibitions or rewards<sup>2</sup> (Skirbekk et al. 2015; Carroll 2012). Moreover, the informal as well as formal educational system socializes individuals to envision families with children as the normative family form.<sup>3</sup> Turner-Vorbeck (2006:153) emphasized that despite the ever increasing diversity of families found in schools and society today, the school curriculum continues to represent some family forms as normative and valued, leading to pathologisation of those who diverged from so-called standards as “dysfunctional” and “morally wrong.” The economy, particularly capitalist economy, necessitates reproduction not merely for the generation of labour but also for the reproduction of class relations (Luxton 1997). The health industry in a capitalist economy reinforces pronatalism, by promoting assisted reproductive technologies that underpin the supremacy of biological reproduction over parenthood through adoption, or fostering, and devalues them as “last resorts” (Joshi, Prasad, and Kushwaha 2018; Nandy 2017). The intervention of law in the ‘private’ sphere of marriage and family crystallizes the duties of spouses toward each other, and not being able to discharge the responsibility of reproduction could be significant grounds in various cultures for dissolving a marriage (Riessman 2000; Uberoi 1993). In addition, not so institutionalized media discourses glorify motherhood and project childlessness as a pitiful state, or a cold, career-oriented decision for those (especially women) who choose to be child-free. These institutions do not act independently of each other. Instead they act as a networked and coherent system of advocating pronatalism. Against the backdrop of this webbed pronatalism, when individuals (or couples) remain childless, either by choice, or circumstances, they are denounced as deviant entities (Basten 2009; Kelly 2009).

### ***Two cultural contexts: India and Canada***

Within the pronatalist viewpoint, the diverse cultures of Canada and India act as a framework for achieving a greater understanding of the various systems of meaning,

within which people think, feel and act. Canada and India<sup>4</sup> exhibit varying levels of socio-cultural progression and are often projected as a prototype of individualist and collectivist cultural orientations. Not conforming to such a generalization, this study seeks to understand the manifestation of individual autonomy in a network of social relationships. Understanding the role of context in shaping a choice is crucial particularly in a developing country such as India, which displays the coexistence of the modern, western, rational utilitarian, individualist values and the traditional, collectivist, agrarian values (Sinha and Tripathi 1994; Sinha et al. 2001). This coexistence of value systems becomes evident when reproduction and the role of parenthood are venerated to the extent that those who are not parents are ridiculed and stigmatized in Indian culture. Simultaneously, there is an emerging and increasing trend of individuals in the cities of India intentionally choosing not to procreate (Bhambhani and Inbanathan 2018). The collectivist orientation is evident from the stigma associated with childlessness, since it goes against the collective norm. Yet within this collectivist framework, the investigation of individualistic negotiations of the non-conformist choice not to reproduce has not been carried out. Conversely, Canadian culture demonstrates the recognition of being childfree as a lifestyle choice, yet stereotypes those, especially women, who do not conform to the pronatalist norm by labels such as selfish, over involved in work, deviant, materialistic and coldhearted (Veevers 1980; Blackstone and Stewart 2012). These labels connote the normative expectation of procreation in the Canadian culture, which, even when it acknowledges a non-conformist choice such as not having children, yet doesn't approve it altogether. These nuanced particularistic values makes the choice not to reproduce contentious, even in societies where it may appear as a viable lifestyle choice. Sociological studies that have investigated the choice not to reproduce have been conducted in modern societies (such as in Australia, Canada, the U.S., and in several European countries) which offer a wide array of choices. The exploration of this choice in a culture that has been newly exposed to modernity, particularly in the institution of family, could supplement existing knowledge, by highlighting the attributes of modernity that determine this non-conformist choice, and the process through which it is negotiated in the larger pronatalist structure.

### **Canadian context**

Canadian demography has been at crossroads for decades with fewer numbers and an ageing population. Canada accomplished Total Fertility Rate (TFR) below replacement level in 1971, and the recent estimates have a TFR of 1.61<sup>5</sup> (2016). An estimated fertility rate of 2.1 is needed to sustain the population, but it is no longer desired by individuals/couples in Canada, and it is through immigration that the population has been sustainable since 1999.<sup>6</sup> This reduction in fertility rates has affected family forms too. The census of 2016 indicates that 48.9 percent of families<sup>7</sup> (increased by four percent since 2011 census) are without children, which also includes empty nests. Besides the number of couples without children (either temporarily and/or permanently), married or cohabitating, has been on the rise as the proportion of couples with at least one child has been reduced to 51 percent, which is the lowest ever recorded (Press 2017). Furthermore, an analysis of General Social Survey data (of 2006) indicated the

proportion of childlessness in the age range of 46-51 as being 16.6 percent for women and 17.3 percent for men, and it has been increasing among individuals of younger birth cohorts (Ravanera and Beaujot 2014). However, this is an estimation of overall childlessness, and not an indication of circumstantial or choice-driven childlessness, or as we have referred in this paper, a difference between involuntary childlessness and voluntary childlessness.

These numbers illustrate the complex interaction of social, economic and cultural forces, leading to an emergence of varied family sizes and forms in an ever-metamorphosing Canadian society (Luxton 2011). There has been an increasing participation of women in the labour force, greater pressure on men to participate equally in domestic labour, more success of movements that demanded the legal and social recognition for same-sex marriages and parenthood, feminists fighting for decriminalization of abortion to give women the right to choose if, when and how many children they would have, no fear of unwanted pregnancy, and the emergence of new reproductive technologies that unfold a new family form where one can have more than two parents (there could be a set of genetic parents i.e., sperm and egg donors, a biological parent who carries the fetus, an adoptive parent, stepparents). These are some of the pivotal changes that have led to changes in family size and forms (Luxton 2011). Despite such intensifying diversity in family forms, the predominant nuclear family form has adapted itself to the challenging conditions and has gained greater pervasiveness as manifested in its acceptance by even unconventional families. The institutionalization of cohabitation under common-law marriage, and the legalization of homosexual marriages, depicts the triumph of long fought battles for gaining acceptance and rights. At the same time it is also a progression of “unconventional” domestic arrangements and “alternative lifestyles” toward the most acceptable family form (Hudak and Giammattei 2014). Such pervasiveness of the heteronormative nuclear family form continues to guide family policies in myriad ways, and in turn informs social life (Gavigan and Chunn 2007).

To curb the plummeting fertility rates and control the “crisis of family” (Luxton 1997), and to direct individuals to the normative family form, federal provincial governments have enacted various policies. Measures designated specifically to enhance birth rates (pronatalist policies), and to facilitate women to combine production and reproduction (family assistance policies) were two pivotal approaches. The first includes the Canada Child Tax Benefit (CCTB) and Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB) policies that provide childcare assistance to parents with low income. Both these policies entail disbursing payment to the primary caregiver, which is often assumed to be a woman unless demonstrated otherwise (Woolley, Madill, and Vermaeten 1997; Nichols 2016). The second set of policy measures includes the provision of job security- [up to] fifteen weeks maternity and [up to] forty weeks parental leave (can be shared by both the parents).<sup>8</sup> Though these policies suggest a level playing ground for the transition to parenthood, the statistics narrate a disparate story. Only 30.8 percent of new fathers claimed or intended to take parental leave in 2013 (Lero 2015). On excluding the province of Quebec,<sup>9</sup> which has the provision of nontransferable leave of 3 to 5 weeks exclusively for fathers, only 12.2 percent of fathers in Canada availed parental leave in 2013 (*ibid.*), which indicates that mothers continue to be the primary child caregivers in the family. Maternity and parental benefits, while ostensibly supporting parents in

combining wage work and care work, actually fortify the conventional gendered division of labour. Further, besides ensuring the wellbeing of the families with children, childcare benefits also play a role in reinforcing pronatalism in order to promote population growth (Woolley, Madill, and Vermaeten 1997). These policies do not just direct individuals to fulfill pronatalist compulsions, but also enforce conditions of optimal parenting.

### **Indian context**

In pronatalist Indian society, getting married and having children are not just a matter of choice, and having children is the *sine qua non* of being married. Married couples are often asked, “when are you giving the good news?” (Menon 2017) or “when are you starting a family?” The question “do you want to have children?” is never asked in Indian society. This manifestly demonstrates how the institutions of marriage and family constitute the supporting pillars of the pronatalist structure in Indian society. Industrialization and increasing urbanization have, however, touched all social institutions including marriage and family. The dominant discourse on family change projects a unilateral change in family structure, from large and complex families to small, nuclear families (Uberoi 1993; Kashyap 2007). The recent numbers however, do not indicate wide variations. Nuclear households constitute 52 percent (marginal increase from 51.7 percent reported in census 2001), and are the largest household type according to census 2011.<sup>10</sup> The share of nuclear households in rural areas has grown from 50.7 percent in 2001 to 52.1 percent in 2011, whereas in urban areas it has declined slightly (from 54 percent to 52 percent) possibly due to housing constraints. Reducing fertility rates are one of the causes of reducing family size. The TFR has declined from a high of 3.2 in 1994 (Haub 2014) to 2.4 (estimated) in 2018<sup>11</sup> and in some states it is even below replacement level. However, on an average, the replacement level is yet to be attained. Another possible factor for the changing family form could be a gradually increasing level of childlessness among ever married women above 40 years of age. By using the census data, Ram (2005) inferred that childlessness has increased to 6.2 percent in 2001 from approximately 4.1 percent in 1981. This rate has further surged to 7.89 percent according to the 2011 census (Baudin and Sarkar 2018). These estimates of childlessness, however, offer no information about the causes of childlessness, which could be involuntary and/or voluntary. Moreover, defining involuntary and voluntary childlessness in an unambiguous manner has been a contentious issue, as they are largely defined subjectively (Basten 2009; Baudin and Sarkar 2018). The statistics on the proportions of childlessness contribute toward an understanding of changing family sizes and forms, but do not indicate the proportion of individuals who deliberately forego parenthood.

The nuclearisation of households is not necessarily a satisfactory indicator of the endorsement of nuclear family norms (Kashyap 2007). This is because a family is not just a structure, but is also a dynamic functioning entity, where the relationships among various kin continue to prevail, and guard the gendered division of labour, irrespective of the living arrangement, or type of household. Functional family ties have been given prominence by a few authors (Uberoi 1993; Kashyap 2007), but the dominant discourse



on family change in India emphasizes the “structural” change which has a strong influence on family policies. The enhanced “nuclearisation” of households, chiefly due to industrialization and urbanization, posed the challenge of providing support to mothers so that they could contribute in the building of the Indian economy. To meet the special needs of new mothers, the Maternity Benefit Act (1961) was enacted with provisions for 12 weeks of paid maternity leave, and a crèche facility in the work place. The recent amendment in the Maternity Benefit Act (2017) increased the duration of paid maternity leave from 12 weeks to 26 weeks.<sup>12</sup> However, it does nothing to help women working in the informal sector of the economy (about 90 percent of women workers; in Mohapatra 2015). Besides, these policies support only mothers, which further intensifies the perception of women as the primary caretakers, with minimal expectations from fathers to contribute in a child’s care and upbringing. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) data comparing gender disparities across 30 countries, placed India at the lowest rank, with men spending an average of only 19 minutes/day in household chores (Phillips 2014). Being a mother continues to revolve around the taxing responsibilities of cooking, cleaning and feeding, while the father’s involvement is limited to the mental development of children, to prepare them for facing the economic competition in the global environment of competitiveness (Luke, Xu, and Thampi 2014). This suggests the preeminence of heteronormative families for a child’s optimal development, in turn disregarding diverse forms of parenting experiences such as single parenting, homosexual parenting, foster parenting, community parenting and others that do not fit into the “normative” heterosexual marriage resulting in biological parenthood. Heitlinger (1991) uses the concept of selective pronatalism to argue a similar premise of pronatalist cultural prescriptions that are applied selectively, based on marital status and sexual orientation.

The *conditional pronatalism* in Indian society is a complex matter due not only to innumerable conditions that define the legitimacy of a child, but also the politics of the fertility rate that makes a child birth desirable, or undesirable. The primacy of the institution of marriage for parenthood makes childbirth legitimate, brings the status of being a complete adult to individuals, and also a sense of a complete marriage to couples (Riessman 2000; Uberoi 1993). This leaves the child born outside marriage, and the mother, as unwanted and vulnerable. It also indicates an important condition of pronatalism, where reproduction is revered within the institution of marriage, but is forbidden outside marriage. The notion of completeness for individuals and marriage only when they have children, in turn, propels couples to seek medical intervention when they are unable to have children (Fathalla 2000). Being seen as incomplete without children has been fueling the Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs) industry and it has even made India a hub of ARTs around the globe (Malhotra et al. 2013). This indicates the second condition of pronatalism where biological reproduction is venerated, and preferred to the relatively inexpensive option of adoption. The third condition is manifested in the form of limits imposed by states to have not more than two children, and thus, a fixed family size. The enforcement of such a norm in some Indian states<sup>13</sup> disqualifies parents with more than two children, from—participating in local body elections; benefiting from various government healthcare services for maternal and child care; getting free rations, and other such measures enacted to bring down the fertility



rate to replacement level (Visaria, Acharya, and Raj 2006; Dak 2009). Moreover, the government incentivises individuals to undergo sterilization after the birth of their second child, under the ambit of family planning (Visaria et al. 2006). Such predispositions of pronatalism (with conditions) operating in the Indian society makes the choice to be childfree inconceivable for most, and it is therefore necessary to enquire into how and why some people go against the tide, as it were, in choosing to be childfree.

### ***Data and method***

The process of arriving at the decision to forego parenthood and its context specific experiences was examined utilizing an interpretive paradigm. It enabled discovering the meanings that participants assigned to their decision-making experiences, which reflected their historical and cultural context, and at the same time equipped us to acknowledge our “own backgrounds” that might influence the interpretation of participants’ experiences (Creswell and Poth 2007:21). Participant couples from Canada and India were encouraged to recollect and recount narratives of events and encounters that constituted their experiences of the decision-making process to forego parenthood. Recollected experiences that constituted the principal data for the study depended entirely on participants’ ability to reflect on and effectively communicate those of their experiences that they perceived were critical. This is an inherent limitation in a study that attempts to capture and describe human experiences which cannot be observed, but can be retold by possessors of those experiences (Polkinghorne 2005). Therefore, certain vital aspects of decision-making may have been consciously or unconsciously omitted by the participants.

The participants were identified and contacted primarily through online communities<sup>14</sup> of childfree members, and some who were not a part of these communities were referred to by friends and acquaintances, leading to a referral or snowball sampling. For the interview, however, a purposive selection of participants was based on the inclusion criteria of self-reported childfree couples residing in India and Canada. The criteria to rely on participants’ self-report of being childfree, could only be partly validated through probes on family planning measures employed to prevent conception, and how effective they have proven to be in avoiding conception.

In Canada, Veevers (1980) carried out one of the first studies on childlessness by choice and used the criterion of being married for at least five years, and subsequent studies have used the same criterion, to tap the experience of facing social pressure to reproduce, which commonly intensifies after the initial few years of marriage. Since cohabitation is legally and socially acceptable in Canada, heterosexual couples in common-law unions or marriages, who have been partners for five or more years, were invited to participate in the study. However, cohabitation is yet to gain legal and social acceptance in India, so only married couples were invited to participate. Further, the average and median first-birth interval (i.e., gap between marriage and the first live birth) in India is estimated to be between 1.5 to 2.5 years (Kumar and Danabalan 2006; Pratap et al. 2011). Thus, couples who have intentionally foregone parenthood for four or more years were selected. This variance in the relationship status and duration—a requirement of being married for at least four years in the case of Indian participants,

while for Canadian participants, being in common-law, or married for five years—may appear to be an inconsistency, and thus, a weakness in the participant selection criteria. However, because the socially prescribed timeline for embracing parenthood varied in the two countries, the pronatalist pressures became clearly noticeable once they passed this timeline, which is to say, after about five years of being in a common-law relationship, or marriage in Canada, and four years of being married in India. It nonetheless facilitated in recording episodes of participants' experiences where they stepped away from their early articulated decision and deliberated on incidences of revisiting them after entering a heteronormative union.

The data were collected through multi-stage participation. The first stage involved completing an online preliminary structured questionnaire soliciting personal and family background details including- the duration of the relationship or marriage with the present partner, educational qualification, occupational status, individual and household income range, religious affiliation of the couple as well as their parents, location of their parents' residence, frequency of meeting with parents if living in separate habitations. This was followed by joint interviews with the couples, which comprised the second stage. To elicit in-depth narratives, a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions was used, with questions such as, when was the first time the couple discussed their disinclination toward parenthood? Who initiated the discussion? What were the main concerns that individuals/couples identified during these discussions? Were there clearly articulated reasons for not wanting children? Other questions concerning the couples' decision-making were posed, and the conversational approach of interviewing prompted several questions specific to the interviewees' accounts. These interviews were conducted at a time and place of the couple's choosing, except in a few cases where an online interview was conducted, because of the inability to visit the participants' cities<sup>15</sup> of residence. The joint interviews provided a first-hand opportunity to observe the interaction between the spouses and the process of negotiation, mediation and constant reflection to provide a joint account of their arrival at the decision not to have children.

In all, 36 couples were jointly interviewed, with the first eighteen interviews being with couples residing in Canada, and the remaining eighteen with couples in India. These interviews lasted between 60 and 180 minutes. Further rounds of interviews were conducted through phone calls, to fill gaps that were discovered from the preliminary analysis of the collected narratives. After each interview, participants were requested to complete a reflective journal which comprised a brief statement requesting each participant to write any thoughts that they could not share during the interview, or those that occurred to them after the interview. The reflective journal, thus, covered individual experiences that may have been muted in a joint narrative, or could not be shared due to the spouse's presence, or for other reasons.

The interviews were systematically transcribed from voice recording to text. With the use of ATLAS.ti, the large amount of textual data was first coded into open codes giving rise to hundreds of open codes, which were then thematically analyzed to identify patterns of decision-making, and generate rich descriptions of each pathway. The narrative approach was utilized to complement the layered and richly textured stories of lived-experiences of diverse decision-making pathways. This approach also offered an effective

means of grasping the closely knit personal and human dimensions of experiences over time, by taking into account the close connection between individual experience and the cultural context (see Connelly and Clandinin 1990).

### ***Study participants***

All the prospective participants of the study were sent an elaborate information sheet along with a consent form to facilitate informed decision-making regarding their participation in this study. To keep the personal information of the participants confidential, pseudonyms have been assigned. The attributes of participants' identities from two cultural settings are being outlined separately to maintain coherence. Out of the eighteen childfree heterosexual couples in Canada who participated in this study, one-third were in common-law unions and the rest were married. Five couples had been in common-law<sup>16</sup> unions for one to four years before getting married. Having been in common-law relationships for several years, when some couples decided to get married, there was an assumption in their immediate social circle that they were planning to have a child. As Judith (aged 38, married for three years after being in a common-law union for six years, manager, residing in Vancouver) narrated, "I have had people ask me, "oh you have been with Alan so long, why did you decide to get married now? Are you going to start having kids?" This reflected the normative expectation of reproduction implied in the institution of marriage, which is elaborated in the subsequent section. On an average, the couples have been in a relationship for 11.8 years and have been married or in a common-law union for 9.2 years. The ages of the wives or female partners ranged from 30 to 45 years ( $M=39$ ), and the husbands' or male partners' ages ranged from 29 to 50 years ( $M=40.1$ ). Canadian participants exhibited heterogeneity in terms of education, occupation, ethnicity and religiosity. Except for six individual participants who were post-secondary diploma/certificate holders, the rest had educational qualifications of a bachelor's degree or above. All but five individual participants were engaged in full-time middle- or upper-middle-class professions. Out of these five, two men were self-employed, and two women were working from home due to certain health issues, and a woman was a part-time worker since she was also a post-graduate student. The majority of the participant couples were ethnically Canadians, except for five of them, among whom one was from a West Asian country, and the rest were in an inter-ethnic union, including two Chinese-White unions, a German-American union, and a Korean-Filipino union. All the couples lived in a two-person household, with the majority having one or more pets. Only one-fourth of the total individual participants mentioned their religious affiliations, and among them, all except one were Christians, the other being a Buddhist.

The eighteen heteronormatively married Indian couples exhibited enormous diversity in their identities. The female participants' ages ranged from 26 to 42 ( $M=34.2$ ), and male participants were between 31 to 54 years old ( $M=36.6$ ). The average duration of their marriage was 7.8 years within a range of 4 to 19 years. Except for two couples married through their parents' choice, with the consent of both prospective spouses, the remaining women were married out of their own choice, with men of different castes and religious faiths. Over half the women participants and slightly less than half the

men participants indicated they had no religious affiliation. Among the women participants who mentioned their religion, all except one were Hindus, the lone one being a Muslim. All the participants had at least a Bachelor's degree, and about half of both male and female participants had a master's degree. A man and a woman were doctorates. Most men were engaged in professional and managerial professions, except for three who were self-employed. More than half the women participants were engaged in diverse passion-driven entrepreneurial activities such as being a holistic nutritionist, corporate trainer & image consultant, owning a travel enterprise, to name a few. The rest were engaged in conventional professional and managerial roles. The households of participating couples fell in the category of middle- and upper-middle income groups. Except for a couple who lived in a joint household, the rest lived in a two-person household.

In comparison to their parents, the characteristics of childfree individuals described by studies on the decision to be childfree, showed an attainment of a higher level of education, employment in professional and managerial occupations, relatively lesser religiosity, and residence in urban areas (Agrillo and Nelini 2008; Shapiro 2014), which were also corroborated among the characteristics of participants of our study in both countries. These characteristics are also a reflection of certain privileges, and a level of information and exposure to varied lifestyles, which may extend the opportunity of voluntarily questioning the discourse of a normative life-course. Being a believer in any religion, for instance, was a crucial segment of this normative life-course, which participants began to question, as evident in Christy's comment (she is aged 40, married for twelve years, is a sales and marketing professional, and resides in Waterloo, Canada), and Swati's observation (she is aged 36, married for nine years, is a project consultant, residing in Bengaluru, India):

Christy: In my mid to late 20s, I was very much on discovery of myself ... I made the choice of leaving the religion, little bit exploring about myself. So it was more after all of that, when I started to realise, "okay, hold on! I have choices here and I don't have to follow what my family did, I don't have to follow what I was brought up to believe."

Swati: My parents and aunt's family would visit every new temple that came up. I was more influenced by my grandparents, who were not religious as they were influenced by the atheistic movement in Tamil Nadu, because I didn't really see any logic in the way my parents practiced religion. I was always a borderline theist ... I used to think, especially about my father, what is the use of doing all this, when you don't even have wisdom to examine your own life. So I thought what's the point of all this?

Along the same lines, some participants recalled undertaking a long and confusing course of gradually pursuing their passion as professions, by questioning and dropping out of the conventional career choices that were encountered in their immediate social settings. These experiences demonstrated the participants' journeys of examining and resisting the expectations to conform, in tandem with the exercise to forego parenthood.

### ***Decision-making pathways***

The decision-making experiences of the couples from the two countries revealed significant similarities in arriving at the decision to forego parenthood. Four distinct decision-

making pathways have been identified and elaborated by presenting narratives corresponding to each pathway. A reenactment of the participants' decision-making processes demonstrates, through their articulation, the complexities involved in arriving at the decision. At the same time, it demonstrates the position of a researcher in the co-construction of a narrative because when the experiences of couples are narrated, "they do not represent 'life as lived' but our [researchers'] representations of those lives as told to us [researchers]" (Etherington 2013:04). Narrative inquiry rendered an opportunity of collaboration, wherein participants reflected on their lives to recount bygone experiences, which were then construed as a meaningful whole. Each narrative takes us through various stages of the participant's life that reflects the evolution of the decision to forego parenthood as a continuous process over time. The course of such a decision-making process varied for couples depending on the stage of life at which it was made. Veevers (1973, 1980) and Cooper, Cumber, and Hartner's (1978) typology of decision-making patterns—*early articulation* and *postponement*—appropriately delineates these decision-making courses. Early articulation represents a decision-making pathway where the decision not to be a parent was made before finding a life-partner. On the other hand, the postponement of the decision concerning parenthood indicates a decision-making pathway that was constructed after entering a commitment. The participants had begun their relationship with the normative expectation of becoming a parent in future, but over time their thinking evolved into the decision to forego parenthood. A visual representation of participants belonging to the identified decision-making pathways is presented in Table 1.

### ***Early articulation to forego parenthood***

This decision making pathway comprises individuals and/or couples who have a strong conviction about not wanting children, which may also constitute a precondition to entering into a firm commitment and/or getting married. This early articulation of the desire not to be a parent was expressed by both, or either of the partners. Considering the norm of procreation, it was anticipated that most couples would have decided not to be parents after getting into a relationship and/or married. These couples' narratives, however, suggested a distinct characterization. More than half the couples who participated in our study (twelve in India and ten in Canada) asserted that not wanting children was already well settled in their minds before entering into a commitment and/or getting married. Narratives reflecting an early articulation of the disinclination toward procreation by one of the partners have been sub-categorised as *independent early articulation*. Independent early articulators had arrived at the decision on their own. These participants anticipated finding an equally determined childfree partner. However, when they could not find one, they chose partners who were uncertain about their inclination to parenthood and could be persuaded to accept a childfree worldview. For instance, Mark (he is aged 43, married for seven years, a graphic designer, residing in Toronto, Canada), exhibited the characteristics of an independent early articulator. In his words,

I guess because of society's common view that people usually have children, I had thought that that would be in my future when I was growing up, but as I learnt more and more about the difficulties, I mean the stress that parents go through ... stress and the cost of having children, it didn't sound fine, it didn't sound good to me.

An extensive reviewing and unlearning of the prescriptive life course gradually led Mark to arrive at a firm decision of negating parenthood, which he conveyed to Arizona (aged 40, a teacher) early in their relationship. Arizona recounted,

so you [referring to Mark] asked me to decide if I wanted to have one [a child] or not. And I decided no for various reasons including being a responsible citizen in the world today and also including the fact that I have been around kids a lot and I know how much work they are ... it seemed like kind of a crazy thing to do without being certain.

Being ambivalent toward parenthood facilitated in Arizona an understanding and acceptance of Mark's worldview of a childfree life. As with Mark's independent early articulation, other independent early articulators too played a significant role in making their partners carefully reassess their own desire to procreate, which they had not done earlier.

There were also narratives exhibiting a decision-making pathway where an early inclination toward not wanting to be parents was evinced by both the partners, and has been sub-categorised as *mutual early articulation*. Both independent early articulators as well as mutual early articulators undertook their individual journeys to arrive at the decision not to become parents. However, a critical distinction between the two paths is that in the former case, the onus of persuading the other partner rested with the one who does not want to be a parent. Mutual early articulators on the other hand, reinforced each other's independently taken decisions.

The main characteristics of early articulators and varied pathways of early articulation are described above. However, the intangible complexities and subjectivities ensuing from the narratives of participants' experiences of arriving at the decision cannot be encapsulated in this synopsis of decision-making pathways. Thus, the narrative of a couple exhibiting the characteristics of a mutual early articulator is presented here. It is in no way representative of all the couples' accounts, but it represents the intricate nature of the decision making process experienced by all couples. The particulars differed among couples but a generic trajectory of these intricacies remained similar across narratives. This generic trajectory refers to the common stages of life-course through which couples traversed, to arrive at a mutual agreement to forego parenthood.

### ***Mutual early articulation: Smriti & Kartik's narrative***

Smriti (she is a software engineer) and Kartik (he is a sports coach and entrepreneur) (ages 31 and 37, respectively, married for five years), who we met in Pune (India), were about to relocate in Singapore at the time of this interview. The conversation opened with their curiosity about this study and motivations for pursuing it. It made Kartik remark,

If it might be let's say ten years back or earlier than that, I would fit into the normal Indian population for sure. But when you travel and meet a lot of people who are not Indians, precisely, if you have travelled a lot, your understanding about certain things start evolving. And that was the time I also started thinking about [not having children]

Traveling to other countries for tennis tournaments exposed Kartik to various cultures and evolved his worldview, which resonated with the experiences of other couples who participated in this study. His response, interestingly, initiated an exchange of



individual journeys for him and Smriti to arrive at the decision of not wanting to be parents. Smriti stated,

I think over the years, most probably during my teenage ... I remember I wanted to adopt, I was very sure of it in the sense that I didn't want my own kids ... I stepped into not wanting my own kids to adopting, and then realising that I don't even need to do that to actually help out someone.

Smriti's responses represented a visceral transition from not wanting biological children to adopting, and later foregoing parenthood entirely. We call it "visceral" since she categorically asserted, "I actually feel strongly about being childfree. I mean, there is something internally instinctive almost, that I have decided that I want to be childfree." Her assertion on one hand is comparable to women's usual expression of an inherent desire to become mothers, but at the same time negates it by suggesting that the desire not to be a mother could be equally inherent for some women. The turnaround from the decision not to reproduce to adopt was backed by a strong sense of obligation to pass on the privileges she had received from her parents, to a deprived child. However, realizing later that adoption will in turn concentrate her time, efforts and energy toward raising one life, which can instead be used in constructively touching multiple lives, she dispensed with adoption too.

Smriti and Kartik expressed separate yet overlapping motivations that evolved and also strengthened their decision overtime. A key and common motivation for them was their staunch veganism, which also brought them closer. In their second meeting at a vegan gathering, they discussed their commitment toward veganism which eventually led Smriti to divulge her strong convictions before getting married, which comprised—being a vegan, an atheist, and childfree. Kartik too had identical expectations of his prospective life partner, and gauging the odds against finding a like-minded partner especially in India, they decided to get married.

*Postponing the decision.* This decision-making can be characterized in terms of entering a commitment (common-law and/or marriage) with the expectation of becoming a parent someday. The postponement of conception for a definite period later turned into an indefinite postponement, leading to an open acknowledgement of the choice to remain childfree. Fourteen of the thirty-six couples (six from India and eight from Canada) followed the course of postponement to entirely forego parenthood. Just as early articulators, two sub-categories of postponing the decision-making emerged. In one of these sub-categories—*shared postponement*—both the partners persisted to be ambivalent or indecisive about being a parent, until they concluded that they were comfortable with their childfree state, and did not want to alter it. These couples usually committed to be partners without a firm view about having or not having children, and had instead decided to wait and see what they would want after some years.

Janvi (she is aged 39, a college faculty) and Vineet (he is aged 37, an archivist), married for seven years, both residing in Bengaluru, India, stated how they were compelled to get married after cohabitating for nearly five years in the United States. They recalled that during their courtship and cohabitation, they had never really discussed having or not having children.

Janvi: I think the kids thing never came up before marriage. Interestingly, the only time it came up was with your [Vineet's] mother



Vineet: yeah

Janvi: and that also happened before [their marriage], not after, interestingly. In the sense that the conversation was around when will the wedding happen. And I was trying to push it [the subject of procreation] away and she [Vineet's mother] was trying to push it forward [chuckles]. So she was saying, "I am sure you also want to start a family." I said, "No, I definitely don't."

A candid articulation of their past discussion reveals that an external prompt introduced by Janvi's future mother-in-law acted as a conversation starter on the subject of having/not having a child. Similar prompts from friends and family led Janvi and Vineet to have discussions on the inevitable changes in their lives if they chose to be parents. Acknowledging the pragmatic concerns surrounding parenthood, they asserted that "having a child is neither a priority, nor an urge." They still have sporadic discussions, but have not reached a firm decision concerning parenthood.

Other postponer couples who entered marriage or commitment with similar indecisiveness toward parenthood were also usually prompted by family and/or friends about their plan to have children. These prompts resulted in discussions among couples that essentially encompassed the unavoidable lifestyle changes if they decided to embrace parenthood. They waited to see if both or either of them could arrive at a decision. However, after a long drawn postponement, and realizing their state of contentment without children, one of the partners anxiously expressed his/her unwillingness to accept parenthood. The anxiety ensued from their apprehension of disappointing their partners. However, this gave a sense of relief to the other partners as well, since they too had been mulling over how to broach the subject with their partners. Thus, despite independently accepting their own childfree state, it took considerable time for these couples to articulate their inclinations, and recognize that they had been on the same page for a long-time.

Another set of postponers entered a heteronormative union (common-law relationship or marriage), with the expectation that someday they will be a conventional family with children. These couples had briefly broached the subject of having children during their courtship, but had rarely discussed individual inclinations at length. In the course of postponement, however, one of the partners began to tilt against parenthood, and over time became resolute and disclosed it to the other partner. Arriving at the decision unilaterally through postponement made this decision-making pathway a relatively prolonged experience, whose final outcome was not certain till very late. One of the partners who had anticipated being a parent after a delay, had to go through an unexpected experience of a tradeoff between their own inclinations and the resolute partner's stance on remaining childfree. These *unilateral* postponer couples took the longest time and encountered upheavals to arrive at the decision.

### ***Unilateral postponement: Marie & Jake's narrative***

The interview began by getting to know about Marie (she is aged 35, human resource executive) and Jake's (he is aged 36, a corporate trainer, residing in Quebec city, Canada) decision to be in a common-law union (for five years). They met through a

mutual friend and decided to live together after about one and half-years of dating. On the reason why they never thought of getting married, Jake said,

I don't need it. I feel it's purely a social fabrication that sort of adds a layer of complication over something that is very simple, which is, I want to live with you [referring to Marie] because I love you. I don't want it to be more than that.

Marie added, "marriage to me is related to religion," and since both of them stopped attending church and following Christianity—the religion of their families—they did not approve of a relationship qualifier in the form of, "another paper, or a twenty thousand dollars dress" [Marie laughingly said]. Common-law unions and irreligion in Quebec are highest among all the provinces of Canada<sup>17</sup> which is why it wasn't perceived as an unusual decision by their families.

They entered a union with the internalized normative presumption of becoming parents someday. On the occasions when he was asked by his family and friends about when they would have kids, Jake would say,

... I don't really feel ready for it [having a child] this year. And then [I would say] I don't want to have kid in an apartment. Maybe I would like to have it in a house. So maybe when we have a house we will have a child.

Jake consistently associated becoming a parent with the fulfillment of specific life-goals such as owning a house. This association not only postponed parenthood, but also provided additional time to reassess whether or not to be a parent. Later, the internalized proclivity to have kids began to shift for Jake, when he observed the challenges of child rearing up-close through his sister's family. Until then a romanticized portrayal of parenthood left little room for deliberation on the practical concerns and challenges encompassing parenthood, which he described as,

... as years went by and my response to the question [when are you having kids?] didn't really change then I realised that maybe I am not just interested in having kids ... Because this is not something you try on for some time and figure out this is boring [Marie chuckling in the background]; this is not what I thought it would be. You are not going to put them on craigslist<sup>18</sup> [both Jake and Marie chuckle].

Along with a sense of self-revelation, the realization of not being interested in parenthood clouded Jake's mind with a feeling of guilt and anxiety. These sentiments were rooted in Jake's earlier inclination toward parenthood with Marie. Not having shared his changed thoughts with Marie, for several months he carried the guilt about changing his mind, and the resultant anxiety, "what if she [Marie] leaves me after knowing this." Marie started to be wary about his odd attitude, and kept pushing him to disclose what was going on. Jake finally broke down and said, "I don't want kids. I changed my mind. Please don't leave me, I don't want kids." Marie did not immediately respond to this unexpected and profound change in the life-course, and took some time to process it. She narrated,

It took me six months to one year to deal with it. I had all this social pressure on me and people telling me, "oh well, you might want some [kids] eventually" and that's when all the irritation started and I didn't know what I wanted. And that's when I consulted a therapist

As with Jake, Marie too had to come out of the social conditioning and pressures, which now caused her bewilderment. Seeking a psychologist's help made her freshly assess her own desires and inclinations. She realized,

**Table 1.** Representation of the number of participants belonging to identified decision-making pathways.

Country of residence	Decision-making pathways				Total no. of couples
	Through early articulation		Through postponement		
	No. of Independent Articulators (individuals)	No. of Mutual Articulators (couples)	No. of Unilateral Postponers (individuals)	No. of Shared Postponers (couples)	
Canada	6	4	5	3	18
India	9	3	1	5	18

Source: Authors' analysis of decision-making pathways

... every time [during therapeutic sessions] the same thing was [sic] coming up and I would feel like I really don't think I want children; I don't feel the need to have it; and my lifestyle choice doesn't [sic] fit well with children either.

This self-realization enabled Marie to ultimately accept Jake's decision of not wanting to become parents. Despite an earlier predilection toward parenthood, both had to embark on a disquieting journey to overcome the normative expectation of becoming parents someday. They are still remorseful about not sharing their latent disinclination against parenthood, which they had not revealed due to an apprehension of losing each other. In this case, Jake emerged as a unilateral postponer, though it cannot be affirmed if Marie would have still chosen to be childfree had Jake not realized and articulated his disinclination to have children, or if she had been in a partnership with someone who wanted to have children. It can, however, be posited that traversing a rough course, they have arrived on the same page, and are resolute in parenting only their rescued cats.

### ***Gendered nuances of the decision-making***

A common experience in the decision-making of all the participants was in having grown up with the expectation that they will be parents someday, irrespective of the pathway actually undertaken later to arrive at the decision not to have children. In fact, the likelihood of having kids was internalized along with the idea of getting married. When asked what motivated mutual postponers, Jia (she) and Minsoo (he) (ages 37 and 44, respectively, married for eight years, a civil engineer, and a stock trader respectively, residing in Toronto, Canada) to marry, in a culture where cohabitation is considered as tantamount to being married, they said:

Minsoo: ... before getting married, when I was a lot younger, I always thought I was going to have children. That's just growing up you always thought that you get married and then you have kids and life goes on.

Jia: Yeah, that is what you are supposed to do

Jia and Minsoo are both second generation immigrants in Canada, from the Philippines and South Korea, respectively. Their formative years had inculcated in them values that getting married and having children were what they were "supposed to do."

While the expectation to follow the pronatalist norm was gender-neutral, gender-specific nuances of internalizing and experiencing it emerged from the narratives of participants. As Jake mentioned, “I feel like it’s similar between men and women except that it is not assumed by most people that men may or may not want kids, but the assumption is that somehow all women should want kids.” This highlights the striking difference in the experiences shared by husbands and wives (or male and female partners) regarding who ‘may’ want and who ‘should’ want a child, indoctrinated by the pronatalist presumption that a woman must want kids because it’s ingrained in her biology. The urge to want kids, in fact, emerged as a cardinal experience in the early life accounts of women participants in India as well as Canada, though they had later dismissed the existence of such an urge.

While explaining how she overcame the expectations to have kids, Christy (aged 40, married for twelve years, sales and marketing professional, residing in Waterloo, Canada), who along with her husband Alex (aged 44, independent mechanical designer), decided to postpone parenthood for a few years before arriving at the decision to forego it, said,

I was waiting for my maternal instinct to kick in. That desire of like, “oh, I really want kids,” because I like kids. I have nephews and nieces and I am close to them. I like kids, I love being an aunt. But I wasn’t having that drive that I want to have my own and it was a bit confusing for me.

Her narrative indicated a skepticism reported by most women participants in exploring any inherent urge to have kids. A gap between ‘liking’ kids and ‘wanting’ them further increased the dilemma for participants of the study. A question emanating from the ambiguity faced by women concerning a maternal instinct is—why would someone have to search for the supposedly natural urge to reproduce if it was indeed innate? The existence of an inherent urge to reproduce has been the focus of some studies (de Melo-Martin 2003; Wood, Koch, and Mansfield 2006). Yet what emerges from the women’s narratives is an obvious ambivalence about being a mother, and they implied that any desire to be a mother is primarily born out of social conditioning. Even those women participants, who were aware of their disinclination to motherhood from an early age, indicated that at some point in their life they were impelled to reflect on their biological urge. As Judith (aged 38, married for three years after being in a common-law union for six years, a firm manager, residing in Vancouver) who was certain quite early in her life that she didn’t want kids stated, “People would often remind me, ‘Oh, your biological clock is ticking. You should have kids soon’. So, then I sort of reflected to myself, ‘do I have a biological clock?’” Thus, in addition to facing and resisting the belief that all women should want kids, women participants also articulated their struggle to subdue the age-specific yearning to have kids, infused either by witnessing women in the same age group becoming mothers, or being reminded by others.

Another converging experience in the narratives of all the participants was that of unlearning the deeply ingrained pronatalist norm which persistently conditioned, maneuvered, and reminded them of a normative life-course, with marriage and procreation as inevitable milestones. These experiences were, however, gendered in nature and were more apparent among couples with varying inclinations toward parenthood, i.e., in the case of independent early articulators and unilateral postponers. Parul’s (aged 31, a

holistic nutritionist, married for four years, residing in Pune, India) narrative facilitates in interpreting the gendered nature of unlearning the normative expectations. She is married to an independent early articulator, Harsh (aged 34, a financial risk manager).

Parul: I wasn't too excited about having kids, neither was I like, I don't want them. So I was neutral initially. So when we were friends, he [referring to Harsh] brought it up. He said that he doesn't want to have children and then I asked him why is it so ... Then when we started living together, I started wondering how would our life turn if we have a child. Then I realised that there are so many things that I want to do in my life and there is absolutely no place for a child. And even if there is, even if I do manage, it's going to be a sacrifice.

Realizing that becoming a parent would obstruct her career aspirations, Parul decided to be in accord with Harsh's firm view of not having children, even before they were married. Women partners of other independent articulator men had also indicated that they felt their own interests and aspirations would have been compromised if they were to have children. Thus, they already had a rationale for agreeing to forego parenthood. To juxtapose this with a man's experience, an excerpt from Owen's (aged 43, a professor, married for ten years, residing in Kitchener, Canada) narrative is referred to here. He is the husband of a unilateral postponer, Christina (aged 38, an independent researcher). She lived with Owen for three years before their marriage, while she was studying and simultaneously working as an independent researcher. Christina recognized that the major share of parenting would fall on her, and she wasn't prepared for it. She revealed this to Owen, stating that she was uncertain about parenthood. Owen, thus, had an early intimation of her parenthood dilemma, which he thought would eventually involve embracing parenthood.

Owen: For me, I went into the relationship thinking that I would want to have children ... [but] because of Christina's choice [of not having children], I had to make that decision more clearly [over time] ... the loss of Christina would outweigh the gain from the child life path compared to my alternative life path [without children] plus Christina.

For Owen, and men in common-law unions, or a marriage with an independent early articulator, or unilateral postponer, the experience of foregoing the normative expectation to be a parent involved a tradeoff between continuing the relationship with their present partners, as against breaking up and having children with some other partner. For women in a commitment or marriage with independent early articulators, or unilateral postponers, in addition to the apprehension of losing a desirable partner, the opportunity cost of compromising their own aspirations also constituted a critical part of the negotiation. It could, therefore, be argued that for women the negotiation process entailed more determinants and greater intricacies, whereas for men it was relatively smooth. This is also an aspect of the contentious and asymmetric parental responsibility, which makes it difficult for women to combine production and procreation. Despite the provisions of seemingly generous maternity leave (and even parental leave in the case of Canada), the apprehension about becoming the primary childrearer provided a rationale for women participants to endorse their partners' decision to remain childfree. Being the undecided partner in the case of independent early articulation and unilateral postponement was, thus, experienced differently by men and women participants, primarily due to varying normative expectations.

### ***Contextual nuances of decision-making***

One of the first studies to explore childlessness by choice in Canada was conducted by Veevers (1973), and thereafter, a substantial literature has confirmed the increasing number of couples in the country who chose not to be parents. The narratives of participants from Canada demonstrated that they were cognizant of this choice quite early in life. Elaborating on when she first started contemplating not having children, Lucie (aged 45, a social worker, in a common-law union for eight years, Montreal) who found a partner (Paul, aged 40, a federal government employee) equally disinclined toward parenthood, said:

I have an aunt. I saw her absolutely liberated and she never had any children. She travelled a lot. She is 75 right now and she is still very happy, and she has been in a long term relationship with her partner[sic] ... I don't know why but I always wanted to be like her. I thought she had more fun in life than everyone around ... I think she is a big part of my decision.

Witnessing her aunt living a meaningful life without kids acted as a reference for Lucie to deliberate on her disinclination toward parenthood. Other Canadian participants too recounted closely observing childfree individuals in their immediate social circle, and reflecting on their own beliefs on parenthood.

In contrast, a handful of researchers and news items discussing this choice emerged in India only after 2000 (Nandy 2017). This is supported by the participants themselves, who had not heard of anyone making this choice during the preliminary phases of their own decision-making process. An independent early articulator, Sushma (she is aged 42, married for 18 years, voluntarily retired as an Information Technology professional, Bengaluru), while describing the initial phase of her own disinclination toward parenthood stated,

I wouldn't have even realized that there are other people in the world who have taken the decision of not having children. Especially, like living in a place where you see that everybody around is having one or two kids ... I would have thought I am the first one who was making the decision not to have kids.

Like Sushma, other Indian participants too indicated an absence of direct or indirect contact with couples who were childfree by choice. Some narrated that their limited exposure to couples without children in their own family, or media, was entirely of involuntarily childless couples who were pitied, and projected as being in an undesirable state. They had to cope with being accorded low esteem or respect among couples who have kids. Such accounts of Indian participants indicating their uneasiness in the lonely choice to be childfree, in turn called attention to the motivations that led them toward a choice, which they themselves construed as unconventional. For some participants, as in the case of Smriti and Kartik (mutual early articulators whose decision-making narrative has been described in the respective section), the exposure to other societies and life-styles through traveling, and not feeling the urge to procreate, acted as the point of departure, which led to recognition of the childfree worldview. For some other participants, their first-hand experience of raising younger siblings, or in observing how their own parents dealt with the challenges of parenthood, was a reference point to assess their own desire to be or not to be a parent. As Rajeev (aged 54, married for nineteen years, a medical doctor, residing in Chennai, India) recounted,

I have seen this [the challenge of parenthood] and I am sure all children while growing up see this [sic] ... there is so much pressure on parents that their children should do well, they should study well, and it's a never ending process. The only thing that used to scare me is that you could never reverse becoming parents ... it's a permanent thing. I would say it's a liability.

Born and raised in a single-earning, middle-class household of a small town in a western Indian state, Rajeev witnessed his parents subduing their own aspirations for the sake of their children (three including him). This planted an ambiguity toward parenthood quite early in his mind, and after he joined medical school, the unwillingness to be a parent crystallized, when he realized that his passion for serving society will be obstructed by parenthood. His account was distinctive on many fronts. He was an independent early articulator in a heteronormative union arranged by his family, unlike most participant couples who selected their partners. The condition of not wanting to have children was clearly laid down by him on the first meeting (which was arranged by the families of both sides) with his prospective spouse, Meera (aged 42, a vegan chef and animal rights activist). Meera articulated, "it [Rajeev's disclosure of his decision not to have children] was a little shocking for me [at first]. I was like, can this happen? It was then [when Rajeev stated his disinclination to have children] that I came to know that this is also an option." After a brief contemplation, Meera agreed to this condition to getting married. Although Rajeev was from a rural background that offered negligible scope for observing varied life-styles, he began to assess the pros and cons of parenthood early in his life. His narrative resonated with some other participants who were brought up in rural settings, which provided little leeway to negotiate with the social expectations and norms. Moving to cities for higher education and professional pursuits, however, presented these participants the space and flexibility required to explore, acknowledge, and exert individual desires and aspirations, which one can only contemplate, but rarely act upon, in a rural setup driven largely by collective values.

After arriving at a firm decision to reject parenthood, participants began to dig into the literature on this choice (mostly western literature), and simultaneously explored the possibilities of connecting with like-minded people, which resulted in the online networks of childfree members in India. It further emerged that joining online childfree networks enabled participants in acquiring a greater degree of confidence about the decision to be childfree, as recounted by Mouni (she is aged 40, married for eleven years, a medical doctor, Mumbai), who started an online Indian childfree community which has about 150 members<sup>19</sup> at present, said,

I did not have any social group and I was feeling the odd one out. So I wanted to find people like me. I searched on Facebook and there were many international groups. I was really very happy at that time [to realise] that there are people like me [who chose to be childfree]. I am not alone in this world ... That was the first group that I joined. It really gave me immense confidence ... there were other groups as well but there was nothing for Indians [exclusively] ... so I thought of starting my own group [chuckles].

Participants who were a part of such online childfree communities specifically referred to the role of these virtual communities in offering the needed support for their decision, which they lacked among their concentric circles of relationships, and the larger pronatalist society. Canadian participants who were a part of such online communities also made



the same observation. However, unlike the Indian participants, these groups were not necessarily the first point of reference on childfree lifestyle for the Canadian participants.

The contextual specificity of being exposed to a childfree lifestyle relatively early in their lives provided the Canadian participants an appropriate space to assess whether they desired to be parents. For Indian participants, however, the lack of any such point of reference in the initial phase of decision-making made them less confident about remaining childfree, and also made them speculate if they were the only ones going against the tide of procreation. Another critical contextual nuance was related to the motivation that constituted an integral part of the decision-making. Child-bearing and rearing responsibilities were deterrents according to all the participants, and freedom from them underpinned their zeal to explore other opportunities, interests and pursuits. This freedom was a critical motivation in the narratives of the participants of both societies, and has also been identified and described in studies across diverse societies (see Houseknecht 1987; Agrillo and Nelini 2008; Blackstone and Stewart 2012; Shapiro 2014). Recurring motives and concerns also included the absence of a desire to procreate; the financial and opportunity costs; early life experiences and an apprehension about their own parenting capability; growing population and climate change; perceived negative effects that having a child would bring into the tranquil relationships that participants shared with their spouses/partners; the physical effort and exertion associated with pregnancy and child birth. Besides these, a lack of conducive surroundings and autonomy to raise a child emerged as a concern expressed specifically by Indian participants. The lack of conducive surroundings ranged from the undue performance pressure for excelling in academic and extra-curricular activities particularly in school, to increasing safety and security concerns. As someone who had worked closely with children for over a decade, an early articulator Kartik (aged 37, a sports coach, Mumbai, India), while specifying how his predisposition to forego kids has only strengthened with time remarked,

I don't think kids have a childhood these days ... All parents want them to have A grades, A + grades or 90 percent and above. They want them to be great at elocution, they want them to be great at science, they want them to be great at maths, they want them to be great at sports, they want them to be great at social bonding. It's like everyone wants their kids to be super-humans. On the other hand, I had such a relaxed childhood. My parents never bothered coming to school. I used to go cycling, or walking, or by rickshaw, all alone ... not out of neglect. It was just a safer time ... so the reasons [for remaining firm on the decision not to have kids] just keep adding up.

Other participants too mentioned the rising pressure on children today, which left little scope for them to explore and pursue their own interests. Thus, they did not want to bring another life into this “never ending rat-race,” of excelling in education for a decent future (spoken by Malvika, aged 35, married for eight years, an animal rights activist, Mumbai, India). Kartik also asserted that the present unsafe environment to bring up children was in contrast to his childhood when “it was a safer time.” Participants who raised children's safety as a major concern in turn rationalized the decision of dual-earning couples to seek their parents' or families' support for child-care, since they can be trusted, and for many, outsourcing child-care can be unaffordable. Indian participants, however, wanted to refrain from involving their families in their everyday life. A shared postponer, Janvi (aged 39, college faculty, married for seven years, Bengaluru), in the course of decision-making also considered the idea of

adoption. However, her concern that her family would be too intrusive in raising a child was a deterrent, and she was not confident that she could resist it. Such concerns of a non-conducive environment, and the absence of autonomy to raise children, were context-specific reasons expressed by Indian participants to provide a rationale for rejecting parenthood.

## Discussion

We return to the question that was raised at the beginning of this paper: how do individuals overcome the norm of procreation laid down by the pronatalist habitus? Pierre Bourdieu and Wacquant's (1992) premise that individual decisions are a reflection and outcome of the habitus they inhabit is evident from a close examination of the decision-making process to forego parenthood. The recurring theme of the normative expectation to have children someday, irrespective of the pathway (i.e., early articulation or postponement) undertaken to arrive at the decision, manifested the ascendancy of pronatalist norms, which led participants to envisage a family with kids. Growing up with a life-course that entailed parenthood as something one is "supposed to do" (a phrase used by the participants—Jia and Minsoo, Toronto, Canada), the initial stage of decision-making comprised acknowledging the fact that parenthood was an expected course of action within a heteronormative union, and not something that the participants consciously chose. This emerged from self-reflection that recognized the hold of the internalized norms in one's life, which gradually led to an evaluation of whether these norms suited the aspirations of the participants.

The internalization of a norm takes place through social interactions in a variety of situations. Such an internalization facilitates in activating a preordained course of action in similar situations without having to contemplate dealing with them whenever they occur. The internalization of a norm relieves someone from the need to gather and process information to make a decision (Gavrillets and Richerson 2017). This view indicates that the participants' expectation to be parents someday emanated from the norms that they had internalized in their own natal families, and also by regular interaction with families who have children. Becoming conscious of these norms, however, brought in the challenge of choosing their own way for the participants, as the collective wisdom of pronatalist norms was no longer relevant to them. For early articulators, since either or both the partners were disinclined toward parenthood even before entering a committed relationship, or getting married, the journey of contestation and negotiation with the pronatalist norms was relatively uncomplicated. On the other hand, for postponers who entered a heteronormative union holding on to the expectation of becoming parents, this journey of unlearning the internalized norms to then walk on a non-conformist path, was prolonged and rough.

While acknowledging the internalization of pronatalist norms and unlearning them, participants simultaneously reflected on why norm-compliance was not suitable for them. To describe the noncompliance of norms, Bicchieri (2006, 2014) argued that while considering individuals as rational decision makers, it should be acknowledged that norm compliance is followed as long as the anticipated benefits from complying with the norms exceed the disbenefits. The motivations conveyed by the participants to forego

parenthood, such as the freedom to pursue their interests and newer opportunities, indicates a rational assessment of how and why complying with the norm of procreation could lead to a denial of their aspirations. This perspective of doing a cost-benefit analysis in the decision to be or not to be a parent, however, at best only partially explains the complexity and intricacies of decision-making that involves a non-conformist choice.

An analysis of the tradeoffs involved in making a choice between the two alternatives can at most accommodate the tangible motivations and concerns such as the apprehension of compromising freedom and opportunities. However, when the decision-making is between a conforming and a non-conforming choice, the negotiation primarily comprises intangible aspects. Participants' narratives reveal an apprehension of not finding an equally determined childfree partner in the case of early articulators, or the anxiety of losing their partner because postponers became conscious of their disinclination toward parenthood after entering a commitment, or getting married, which evidenced an uncertainty that accompanied making a non-conformist choice. This uncertainty about how the choice not to procreate would unfold in the initial stage of decision-making also emerged due to limited (in the case of some Canadian couples), or no exposure (as in the case of Indian couples) to couples without children. Conforming to norms, besides saving the time and effort needed to gather and process the information needed to make a decision, also reduces the risk of uncertain outcomes. Elaborating on this aspect of decision-making, Chang (2017) in her theory of hard choices propounds the view that conventional choices provide a person with a list of anticipated favorable as well as unfavorable outcomes. To an extent, one could thus, foresee and take an informed decision in dealing with the repercussions in case the normative expectation does not align with other life choices. This is supported by the standard conception of rational decision-making which entails arriving at a decision through a careful scrutiny of the expected and unexpected consequences. Chang (2017) further explains that this conception of rational decision-making is based on the reasons that are derived from conventions and these reasons in turn direct the anticipation of intended and unintended outcomes of a choice. Such a conception of rational decision-making is limiting, since the reasons for making a choice are already given. She extends the idea of rational decision-making by introducing the normative power that each one of us possesses, to create our own reasons to choose an alternative that suits us the most. This conception explains the determination of participants to choose a non-conformist alternative, considering the associated uncertainties and risks by creating their own reasons to stay firm with their choice, instead of passively subscribing to the norms dictated by the pronatalist habitus. This paper, thus, argues that an acknowledgement of the internalized norms emanating from the overarching habitus, or the socio-cultural milieu, is just an initial step of the decision-making process concerning non-conformist choices. It then progresses to an introspection of what suits a person's dispositions, priorities and life-situations, which then facilitates in finding reasons to stay resolute on the decision that essentially breaches the norms with which they grew up. Lastly, the uncertain and enduring journey toward arriving at a consensus with a prospective or current partner to forego parenthood, reaffirms the preponderance of pronatalist norms across cultures, overcoming which is what makes decision-making in this context an arduous process.

To conclude: The purview of this research was confined to an understanding of couples' decision-making to be childfree, by engaging with a cross-cultural perspective on the normative expectation to procreate, and the means undertaken to unlearn them. Some aspects that could not be examined in this paper include the convergence and divergence in the pronatalist pressures faced by childfree couples across cultures; dealing with the apprehensions about a future without any children, who may have provided the support and care in their old age; and couples who may have parted ways later in life because of differences in their decision whether to be or not to be parents. These are some of the dimensions of decision-making to forego parenthood that can be further studied. However, as they were not brought within the ambit of the present study, that could possibly be considered as limitations of this study as well.

## Notes

1. It does not sideline the reality of people around the world who are compelled to get married in childhood. Nor does it disregard the untimely entry of children into the labour force due to poverty and/or child-trafficking. The dominant social narrative, however, propels a virtually linear life-course for transitioning to adulthood.
2. This line of thought is evident in the pronouncements of some contemporary religious leaders, such as Pope Francis, who was against abortion even in the cases of foetus abnormality (see Jason Horowitz's report in *The New York Times* of May 25, 2019, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/25/world/europe/pope-abortion-sick-fetus.html>); or his rebuke against those choosing not to procreate (see Stephanie Kirchgaessner's report in *The Guardian* of February 11, 2015, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/11/pope-francis-the-choice-to-not-have-children-is-selfish>); or Hindu religious and political leader, Sakshi Maharaj's instruction for Hindu women to produce at least four children to protect the religion (see Mohammad Ali's report in *The Hindu* newspaper of January 07, 2015, available at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/sakshi-stokes-another-controversy-asks-hindus-to-have-4-kids/article6763837.ece>).
3. The result of an online search of family forms in school text books shows images of infographics in school textbooks and story books from various countries. These infographics contain images of families with kids, such as, a heteronormative couple with kids, same-sex parents, single parents, and grandparents with children. This is just one example reflecting ways in which representation of family forms could condition young minds to envision a normative family as one that includes kids. A critical review of the popular culture and mass media projections of families and their impact on the conception of what defines a family among young minds could shed further light on the socialization process that suggests the image of a normative family.
4. Indian and Canadian cultures are not two homogeneous cultures. They are heterogeneous cultures as they are an assimilation of assorted sub-cultures, covering which is beyond the scope of this study. This study is limited to understanding the role of the prevalent dominant discourse in the two cultures in inhibiting an unconventional choice.
5. Retrieved on 7<sup>th</sup> August, 2017 from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-630-x/11-630-x2014002-eng.htm>
6. *Ibid.* Retrieved on 7<sup>th</sup> August, 2017 from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-630-x/11-630-x2014001-eng.htm>
7. Statistics Canada defines a census family as, "a married couple and the children, if any, of either and/or both spouses; a couple living in common law and the children, if any, of either and/or both partners; or a lone parent of any marital status with at least one child living in the same dwelling and that child or those children. All members of a particular census family live in the same dwelling. A couple may be of opposite or same sex."

- (Dictionary, Census of Population, 2016, retrieved from <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/dict/fam004-eng.cfm>, on 28<sup>th</sup> December, 2019).
8. The parental leave is extendable with a reduced pay. One receives 55 percent of their pay (up to a maximum of C\$573 per week) when availing standard parental leave, which is reduced to 33 percent (up to a maximum of C\$344 per week) in the case of extended parental leave.
  9. Quebec is unlike other provinces and territories of Canada in its social and political attributes, and it is similar to European countries. Quebec's Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP) was instituted in 2006 and offers relatively more pay to new parents. Also, the eligibility criterion of having worked at least 600 hours in the previous year, which is applicable in other provinces, is replaced by the criterion of having earned C\$2000 in the previous year under QPIP. Thus, even self-employed and part-time workers who would otherwise be excluded due to the minimum working hours requirement, are benefitted under QPIP. Moreover, it has a five-week non-transferable leave component for fathers.
  10. Other household types include—supplemented nuclear households including nuclear family members plus other relative(s) (16 percent); joint households including parents living with their married children (16 percent); five percent each of single person and sub-nuclear households (includes a fragment of nuclear family such as widow(er) living with unmarried children, or siblings living together); broken extended (4 percent), and others (2 percent).
  11. The World Factbook. Retrieved on 7<sup>th</sup> August, 2019 from <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/geos/in.html>. The decline in TFR varies across states.
  12. All you need to know about increased maternity leave'. Retrieved on 31<sup>st</sup> August, 2017 from <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/relationships/work/All-you-need-to-know-about-increased-maternity-leave/articleshow/50622146.cms>
  13. The recently tabled Constitution Amendment Bill (2020) by private members in the Rajya Sabha (upper house of the Indian parliament) seeks to enforce a nation-wide two-child policy by incentivising taxes, education, employment etc. for those with small families, while withdrawing these benefits from families with more than two children.
  14. About thirty regional (Indian and Canadian) and international communities of childfree members were approached to circulate the call for participation in this study.
  15. Toronto, Montreal, Quebec city, Waterloo, and Kitchener, in Canada were visited in person for conducting the interviews, since they were at a reasonable distance from Toronto, where the first author resided during her tenure as a Shastri Indo-Canadian Doctoral Fellow (July-December, 2017). Interviews of childfree couples in Mumbai, Pune, Delhi, Hyderabad, Bengaluru, Chennai and Kochi in India were carried out during February-December, 2018. One participant couple each from the cities of Vancouver and Lethbridge in Canada, and Bhimtal in India were interviewed through an online video conferencing application, since travelling to these distant places for single interviews was not considered practical.
  16. The recognition of living in a conjugal relationship as a common-law union depends on the duration of the partners' cohabitation, and varies from province to province. For instance, in Ontario and Manitoba, if a couple has been living together in a conjugal relationship for at least three years, they are recognised as a common-law couple, while in Nova Scotia and British Columbia this duration is two years. If a couple delivers a child during cohabitation, they gain recognition as common-law spouses even before completing the minimum number of cohabitating years. In the case of separation, common-law partners can rightfully claim a share in the property and assets acquired during their cohabitation, and can also evoke spousal claim for the care of a child.
  17. As per the 2011 Census of Canada, only 35.4 percent couples in the province of Quebec were legally married (Statistics Canada. Government of Canada. Retrieved on 20<sup>th</sup> September, 2019 from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/91-209-x/2013001/article/11788-eng.htm>). Also, between 2001 and 2011, there was a sharp climb in people claiming no religious affiliation (Pew Research Centre's 2013 report on Canada's changing religious landscape, Retrieved on 20<sup>th</sup> September, 2019, from <https://www.pewforum.org/2013/06/27/>

[canadas-changing-religious-landscape/](#)). Both these changes in preferences and attitudes have largely been attributed to the provinces' Quiet Revolution of 1960s, which reduced the hold of the Church on people's lives.

18. An American online platform that hosts classified advertisements on jobs, rentals, items for resale, community service and so on. Indian platforms Olx and Quikr provide similar services.
19. A few other online childfree communities exclusively for Indians have comparatively more members. However, the group initiated and regulated by Mouni has stringent criteria of member selection, as she stated, "I believe in quality not quantity." To gain membership of this group one has to answer questions such as, what do they understand by being childfree? What would they do in case they or their spouses conceive? These questions are meant to filter out those who are involuntarily childless, and/or wish to be parents in the future, from entering the group.

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