"I hate all the children, especially mine": Applying relational dialectics theory to examine the experiences of formerly childfree regretful parents

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Abstract

Guided by relational dialectics theory (RDT), we analyzed 85 first-person testimonials of parental regret written by users of the /r/childfree subreddit. We interrogated how competing discourses animate what it means to be a parent (our semantic object). Contrapuntal analysis revealed dominant and marginalized Discourses of Parenting as Heaven (DPHN) and Parenting as Hell on Earth (DPHL), respectively, as well as a third Discourse of Parenting as (the Only) Choice (DPOC). We identified three kinds of dialogically contractive practices including a new form we call fear of missing out (FOMO), two forms of diachronic separation, four forms of synchronic interplay including a new form we introduce (i.e., allying) that is useful when more than two discourses compete, and one form of dialogic transformation. We argue that FOMO serves as a catalyst for diachronic separation. We offer practical implications for fencesitters (those "on the fence" about having children), counselors, and policymakers.

Keywords

Child free by choice, communication, dominant culture, fear of missing out, family or families, parenthood, power, qualitative methods

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An estimated 7% of U.S. parents ages 45 or older (Newport & Wilke, 2013), 8% of German parents ages 18 or older (Thurm & Venohr, 2016), 5.1% of Spanish fathers with a child under 7 (Meil et al., 2023), and 13.6% of Polish parents ages 18 to 40 (Piotrowski, 2021) report that they would not have children if they had to do it over again. In other words, many parents across the world might regret it. _Regret_ is a negative emotion marked by _counterfactual thinking_, realizing that our situation could be better if we had made different decisions in the past (Camille et al., 2004). Unlike disappointment which occurs when forces outside of a person's control yield negative outcomes, regret and its negative ramifications emanate from a person's own choices and is a reason this emotion is so potent (Zeelenberg, 1999). Accepting responsibility might be one reason people who experience and ruminate about their regret report feeling less satisfied about life and struggle to cope with negative events (Lecci et al., 1994; Schwartz et al., 2002). Furthermore, regret can bias decision-making and is so intrinsically aversive that people will sacrifice an objectively superior reward just to avoid it (Zeelenberg et al., 1996).

In addition to personal responsibility, the other factor that contributes to regret is the meaning ascribed to the object of regret. Put differently, some regretful choices might be more or less influential depending on the context. In the present study, we examine what it means to be a parent from the perspective of _formerly childfree regretful parents_, people who were once childfree, chose to have children, and now regret their decision. Understanding what it means to be a parent is important, not only because of the adverse outcomes and dangers of making a regretful choice for the parent (e.g., less satisfaction, biased decision-making; Matley, 2020), but also considering the responsibilities associated with parenting and the potential ramifications being a regretful parent might have on children (e.g., neglect, estrangement; see Scharp et al., 2015). Furthermore, better understanding the meaning of parenting is important considering the stigma attached to both being childfree (Hintz & Brown, 2020) and the stigma of parental regret (Moore & Abetz, 2019). Indeed, parental regret is antithetical to how parents are expected feel about their children, especially for mothers who are supported to love their children unconditionally from conception to eternity (Faulkner, 2014; Scharp & Thomas, 2016, 2017).

Research has examined the communication experiences of childfree women who later become mothers (e.g., Moore, 2018) as well as the experiences of parents who regret having children (e.g., Moore & Abetz, 2019). Research has elucidated factors motivating feelings of parental regret (Moore & Abetz, 2019), including the _circumstances associated with having children_ (e.g., timing, sacrifices) as well as _having children_ (e.g., difficult children, a desire to be childfree). Simultaneously, reflecting the growing normality of voluntary childlessness (i.e., being _childfree_), exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, 44% of non-parents ages 18 to 49 now report that it is unlikely they will have children someday (Brown, 2021). Childfree families, like families with regretful parents, challenge dominant understandings of what it means to be a parent, for instance, that reproduction is normal, natural, and desirable (Gillespie, 2000).

When communication scholars are interested in understanding meaning, they often turn to relational dialectics theory (RDT; Baxter, 2011; Baxter et al., 2021). RDT posits that the meaning of a particular semantic object is made in the competition of discourses (i.e., ideologies), some of which are dominant and others marginal. Thus, guided by RDT,

the first goal of our study is to identify the discourses that animate what it means to be a parent and how those discourses struggle for dominance. To do so, we sampled data from Reddit's/r/childfree subreddit (Reddit, 2023a), an online community of 1.5 million childfree users and the largest public childfree forum on the internet. The/r/childfree subreddit has cataloged 85 accessible (i.e., not deleted) "first-party testimonies" on its wiki that childfree users who had children and regretted doing so posted between 2011 and 2021 (Reddit, 2023b). We then engaged in contrapuntal analysis, the corresponding method of RDT (Baxter, 2011). Although RDT researchers have identified some new communicative mechanisms by which dominant discourses reproduce themselves (e.g., mobbing; Wolfe & Scharp, 2022a), they have yet to attend to how this process of reification and the process of resistance create the possibility of new meaning. Thus, the second goal of our study to illuminate how the struggle for dominance moves the potential for new meaning along a continuum of discursive interplay. Toward meeting these aims, we begin by introducing pronatalism as the driving ideology informing what it means to be a parent in U.S. culture before presenting RDT as our theoretical heuristic.

The Joys of Parenting and the Stigma of Parenting Regret

When asked what makes up a family, the average person in the U.S. stipulates that it is a heterosexual couple who have biological children (Baxter et al., 2009). Thus, it probably comes as no surprise that in the U.S., parenting is almost a foregone conclusion as part of the life course (Pelton & Hertlein, 2011). For women, parenting begins at pregnancy which the culture lauds as a woman's joy, privilege, and reclamation of power (Alcalde, 2013; Rúdólfsdóttir, 2000; Warren & Brewis, 2004). When the baby arrives, the culture expects parents, especially moms, to find bliss in their self-sacrifice and immediate love (Cronin-Fisher & Sahlstein Parcell, 2019; Scharp & Thomas, 2017, 2018; Suter et al., 2015). Yet, this pronatalist discourse, which deems reproduction normal, natural, and desirable, can be harmful (Gillespie, 2000). This is especially true for women who want to be childfree, who face both stigma and barriers to seeking voluntary sterilization (Hintz, 2022; Hintz & Brown, 2019, 2020; Moore, 2021). This discourse, lauding children, might also be a reason why some formerly childfree people ultimately decide to have children even if they eventually come to regret it. Yet, regretful parenting is not adherent to cultural expectations. Thus, pronatalism works both to shame people into childrearing and to then silence those who have come to regret their choice to parent. This ideological domination is particularly of interest to RDT researchers who seek to understand how alternative discourses work to dismantle hegemony. With this in mind, we now explicate our theoretical heuristic.

Relational Dialectics Theory

RDT is a dialogic theory of meaning making based on the theorizing of Bakhtin (1981, 1984). The primary principle of RDT states that the meaning of a particular *semantic object* (i.e., what it means to be a parent) at any given moment is made in the competition of *discourses* (i.e., systems of meaning or ideologies). When discourses compete, they

rarely do so on an equal playing field. Rather, some discourses are dominant (i.e., *centripetal*) whereas others are marginalized (i.e., *centrifugal*). Regardless, discourses are not isolated but rather linked together by the *utterance chain*. To start, an *utterance* is a turn in talk. These turns are *intertextual* such that each utterance references the past and anticipates a future response. Links that reference the past are called already-spoken links and those that anticipate a future response are the not-yet spoken links. When histories and anticipated responses pertain to the culture at large, RDT calls them the *distal links*; when they pertain to an idiosyncratic relationship, they are the *proximal links*. As we are interested in how the culture understands what it means to be a parent, we attend specifically to distal links of the utterance chain across a continuum of interplay.

The Continuum of Discursive Interplay

Regarding the continuum of interplay, at the most contractive end is *monologue* which represents the absence of alternative meanings. Next, are *contractive practices*, or those discursive mechanisms that reify dominant discourses by closing alternative perspectives and the creation of new meaning. Eight existing practices of discursive closure are: (a) *disqualification*, where a person's lack of expertise results in the disregarding of their utterance, (b) *naturalization*, where an utterance is voiced as being the status quo, (c) *neutralization*, where utterances are voiced as being value-free, (d) *topic avoidance*, where certain topics are out-of-bounds for discussion, (e) *subjectification*, where a marginalized discourse is posited as one option among many, (f) *pacification*, where differences are voiced as trivial and futile, (g) *ideal violation*, where utterances voice that something is not as it should be, and (h) *mobbing*, where a dominant discourse co-opts other dominant discourses to silence alternative perspectives (Baxter, 2011; Baxter et al., 2021; Deetz, 1992; Wolfe & Scharp, 2022a, 2022b).

Next along the continuum is diachronic separation which manifests as: (a) segmentation and (b) spiraling inversion. *Segmentation* occurs when a semantic objects' meaning changes over time (e.g., Wenzel & Poynter, 2014) whereas *spiraling inversion* occurs when the dominance of two competing discourses changes over time (e.g., Scharp et al., 2021). To date, RDT researchers have paid less attention to diachronic separation, relegating it as a moderate form of competition. Yet, *diachronic separation* is an important process essential to understanding the ways that meaning is unfinalizable, an assumption upon which dialogism is predicated.

Synchronic interplay occurs when two or more discourses compete within an utterance. Specifically, *entertaining* occurs when a dominant discourse acknowledges the possibility of a marginalized discourse. *Countering* is more polemic and occurs when the marginalized discourse recognizes the dominant discourse only to dismiss it. *Negating* is the most aggressive form of synchronic interplay and occurs when the marginalized discourse outright rejects the dominant discourse. Thus, identifying synchronic interplay is essential to understanding how marginalized discourses resist dominant ones and pivotal to situating RDT as a postmodern critical theory.

Finally, *dialogic transformation* anchors the other end of the continuum of interplay and manifests as *discursive hybrids* or *aesthetic moments*. Comparatively, even though

both have the potential to bring about new meanings, hybrids take on a both/and logic whereas aesthetic moments are more affective. In this regard, hybrids combine the existing discourses and aesthetic moments transform them into something new.

Although researchers have made robust contributions to better understanding and extending what they know about contractive practices, existing theorizing has yet to advance how researchers understand dialogic expansiveness. This means that although some advancements to RDT have come in the form of new ways language reifies ideology, RDT researchers rarely address the (new) mechanisms by which marginalized discourses resist. To date, RDT researchers have yet to consider diachronic separation or synchronic interplay beyond spiraling inversion/segmentation or entertaining, countering, and negating respectively. Although it is possible these lists are exhaustive, it stands to reason that if more contractive practices exist, then more expansive practices might also be at work. Thus, keeping this potential for theoretical advancement in mind, we pose the two traditional RDT research questions but stay open to the possibility that more robust competition is possible:

RQ1: What discourses animate what it means to be a parent from the perspective of regretful parents posting to the /r/childfree subreddit?

RQ2: How, if at all, do discourses compete to construct what it means to be a parent in first-person testimonies posted to the /r/childfree subreddit?

Method

When RDT scholars select a text, they often begin by choosing one that is dialogically expansive such as rituals, the carnivalesque, or narratives (Baxter, 2011). We began by collecting a set of online narratives from Reddit. Online narratives are particularly conducive to contrapuntal analysis, the corresponding method of RDT, because they offer uninterrupted utterances where narrators can tell their story their way. Given that competition often occurs within an utterance, uninterrupted narratives hold tremendous potential for discursive competition, especially because they promote *polyvocality* (i.e., multiple voices with different perspectives). Online narratives also offer the freedom to share experiences without interviewer guidance. This freedom can reduce stigma, coercion, and exploitation of marginalized groups.

Data Collection

Thus, after the IRB determined that the data did not meet the definition of human subjects research, we sampled first-person testimonies of parental regret from Reddit's/r/childfree wiki. As of October 2022, there were $n = 90$ total entries cataloged in the/r/childfree wiki (Reddit, 2023b) of childfree users' firsthand testimonies discussing regret about having children. Of those, users deleted $n = 5$ original testimonies, leaving a final sample of $n = 85$ available testimonies. Users posted testimonies between October 2011 and August 2021. Posts ranged in length from nine to 2,668 words ($M = 564$; $SD = 483$). Reddit is

anonymous (i.e., users create and interact with posts via usernames), and content moderators automatically remove identifiable information from the /r/childfree subreddit. Although/r/childfree (Reddit, 2023a) usually bans parents from posting content to the subreddit, moderators permit parents who express regret about the decision to have children to post to the subreddit.

Data Analysis

Contrapuntal analysis is a form of critical discourse analysis, adapted from thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2022), which is useful for analyzing how discourses compete to create the meaning of a semantic object (Baxter, 2011; Baxter et al., 2021). Data analysis began with *data immersion*, where both authors repeatedly re-read the data corpus. Then, beginning the procedure of *referential adequacy* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), we divided the dataset in half (*n* = 42 testimonies), and both authors identified initial *codes*, units of meaning of interest to the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006) on this half of the dataset. Two examples of initial codes included "investment of time," and "relationship sacrifices." Initial codes coalesced into *themes* (patterns of meaning) reflecting discourses (Baxter, 2011). For example, the initial codes "investment of time," and "relationship sacrifices" became a part of the "resource-intensive work" theme within the Discourse of Parenting as Hell on Earth (DPHE).

Next, we attended to discursive competition via *unfolding* (Baxter, 2011), which involved considering what contextualizes each utterance and to what each utterance anticipates a response. We interrogated the text for diachronic separation, synchronic interplay, and dialogic transformation, and we kept an *audit trail* (a running log of the analytical decisions; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After we established a tentative coding schema, we recalled the second half of the dataset and compared our observations to assess whether new themes emerged. Examining the second half dataset did not warrant substantive changes. Throughout the data analysis process, we looked for negative cases which disconfirmed or altered the findings until the findings reflected 100% of the units of meaning coded (*negative case analysis*). We then met again to resolve disagreements and identify exemplars (*exemplar identification*). In all, we employed five verification procedures (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in this analysis: (a) data immersion, (b) referential adequacy, (c) audit trail, (d) negative case analysis, and (e) exemplar identification.

Reflexivity Statement

As a final marker of rigor and ethics, we position ourselves in relation to our research. We are two childfree, heterosexual scholars with graduate degrees living in the United States. One author is BIPOC and the other is a white former first-generation college student, and both authors are cisgender women. These requisite privileges and disadvantages, and our status as childfree women, shape our entanglement with these data, regretful parents, and the phenomenon of regretful parenthood, and informed how we approached the data analysis reported below.

Table 1. Summary of three competing discourses.

Discourse	Assertions	Example
Discourse of parenting as heaven (DPHN)	• Everyone should have a child. • Having a child is normal and natural. • People without children are missing out on a fulfilling life.	"I never, ever wanted kids. But you know how it goes: 'You'll change your mind when you get older! …when you meet the right girl! …when you have one of your own!'" (ID#28)
Discourse of parenting as hell on earth (DPHL)	• Being a parent is resource-intensive work. • Being a parent is a lifestyle constraint.	"They're hard work. They take all your money and time and energy…even if you love them, you'll always resent them. And you'll have no one to talk to about it because everyone would look down on you." (ID#20)
Discourse of parenting as a (the only) choice (DPOC)	• Being a parent is a personal and autonomous decision.	"Please never succumb to the pressure…never allow a partner, spouse, family to convince you…Having a child never swayed me from the deep-rooted desire to not have children" (ID#69)

Findings

In answering RQ1, we identified three discourses which competed to create meaning about being a parent (see Table 1). The dominant Discourse of Parenting as Heaven (DPHN) positioned being a parent as ubiquitous, natural, and normal, as well as fulfilling. The marginalized Discourse of Parenting as Hell on Earth (DPHL) worked to displace and/or reject the DPHN and instead positioned being a parent as resource-intensive work and as constraining to individuals' desired lifestyles. A third discourse which was co-opted by both the DPHN (in *mobbing*) and the DPHL (in *allying*), the Discourse of Parenting as (the Only) Choice (DPOC), affirmed parenthood as an autonomous, individual, and value-concordant decision. In answering RQ2, we identified three dialogically contractive practices: (a) *naturalization*, (b) *mobbing*, and (c) a new form we call *fear of missing out* (FOMO). We then discuss two forms of diachronic separation (*spiraling inversion*), and four forms of synchronic interplay, including a new form we call *allying* (plus entertaining, countering, and negating), as well as one instance of dialogic transformation in the form of a discursive hybrid which we call *purgatory*.

RQ1: Competing Discourses Animating What it Means to be a Parent

Three competing discourses emerged that constructed what it means to be a parent for formerly childfree regretful parents – the DPHN, the DPHL, and the DPOC, next reviewed.

Discourse of Parenting as Heaven. The DPHN positioned being a parent according to the intensive and pronatalist distal-already-spoken assumptions that: (a) *everyone should have a child*, (b) *having a child is natural and normal*, and (c) *having a child leads to a fulfilling life* (Faulkner, 2014; Gillespie, 2000, 2003). For example, one parent lamented, "I never, ever wanted kids. But you know how it goes: 'You'll change your mind when you get older! …when you meet the right girl! …when you have one of your own!'" (ID#28). Here, the regretful parent articulated the ways people insinuated that everyone should have a child. Others gave voice to the idea that having a child is natural and normal, "I'm not going to lie, as I held my daughter, I felt that amazing feeling of the miracle of parenthood. Then roughly 5 minutes passed, and it was gone" (ID#40). Thus, even though the feeling faded, the miracle of parenthood reflects the dominant discourse that parenting is heaven. Finally, one parent shared how being a parent brought some expected fulfillment, "There would be moments where I'd be happy - watching him sleeping or smiling…But it wasn't enough to make up for everything I'd lost…" (ID#13). Again, despite not remaining satisfactory, Reddit users alluded to the pressures, promises, and rewards of becoming a parent.

Discourse of Parenting as Hell on Earth (DPHL). In contrast, the DPHE positioned being a parent as: (a) *resource-intensive work*, (b) a *priority relationship*, and (c) *lifestyle-constraining*. For example, one regretful parent shared, "My life has been a living hell since the day I found out my wife was pregnant (ID#55)," while another agreed, "They're hard work. They take all your money and time and energy…even if you love them, you'll always resent them. And you'll have no one to talk to about it because everyone would look down on you" (ID#20). For many parents, having child represented (im)material costs. These costs sometimes strained people's romantic relationships. A regretful parent bemoaned, "What was I unprepared for? Losing a good deal of my wife. Before our daughter was born, we were the most important people to each other. Enter child…our daughter was now the most important person" (ID#7). For these regretful parents, having a child came with unforeseen changes to the marital coalition. Lastly, parents regretted not being able to do as they wished. For example, while one said, "I felt like my kid was a second job. I would go home, and it was like going to work. I couldn't go where I wanted, couldn't do what I wanted" (ID#28), another asked, "Do you like being able to do the things you want when you want to do them? That's something that will be gone from your life for the foreseeable future" (ID#10). These examples conveyed the perceived lost opportunities to pursue individual goals. Globally, these three themes illustrate the material, relational, and emotional labor of parenting.

Discourse of Parenting as (the Only) Choice. A third discourse, the DPOC (read to mean both discourse of parenting as a choice and discourse of parenting as the only choice), conveyed that parenting is a *personal* and *autonomous* choice. No person is predestined for heaven or hell. Your choices are what determine your fate. One regretful mother described, "I am not asking you to feel bad for me. I made my own choices. While I won't change my decision and I am the best mom I can be, I urge you to think your decision over if you're thinking about having children" (ID#32). As this example conveys, decisions

and choices are a fundamental part of what it means to be a parent, especially the initial choice to become a parent in the first place. Yet, throughout our data corpus, parents voiced this discourse in two fundamentally different ways. Through the process of unfolding, we identified parenting as a cultural mandate enforced by close others. For example, one parent advocated, "Do not ever let anyone make you feel bad for that decision or listen to anyone trying to coerce you into anything" (ID#74). This example conveys the pressure that couples experience to choose parenthood whereas other parents reiterated that although choice might be constrained, having children is still a choice. Another parent shared, "Please never succumb to the pressure … Having a child never swayed me from the deep-rooted desire not to have children" (ID#69). Thus, the DPOC (choice) was a third available system of meaning that both discourses attempted to leverage in their battle for dominance. Put differently, the DPHN worked to suggest that parenting was the only choice while the DPHL worked to become just one of many choices.

RQ2: Discursive Interplay

Three discourses, the DPHN, DPHL, and DPOC, compete to make meaning of being a parent. In addressing RQ2, we first present three *dialogically contractive* practices, followed by nuances of *diachronic separation*, four expansive practices of *synchronic interplay*, and finally one instance of *dialogic transformation* in the form of a discursive hybrid – purgatory.

Dialogically Contractive Practices

Naturalization. First, *naturalization* occurred where aspects of the DPHN (e.g., that parenthood is natural) were positioned as "just the way things are." As one regretful parent explained, "Everyone says 'It's different when it's your own child.' Sure, I don't like kids in general, but humans are genetically preconditioned to love their own children…. Is it different when it's my own daughter? Sure, I'll agree with that…" (ID#7). Affirming the naturality of the DPHN as a genetic precondition closed opportunities for meaning creation.

Mobbing. Second, *mobbing* occurred where the DPHN co-opted (adopted for its own use) the DPOC (choice) to establish its dominance. As one parent explained, "It should also be okay to say…this small person is a drain on me financially and emotionally and caring for them is not that rewarding, yet I still do it anyway because I've chosen this path and now, we have a social attachment and bond" (ID#80). Another parent similarly noted, "I know there are people here who feel pressured to have kids, and that is not OK. Being brutally honest, I love my kids, they are awesome, the right choice for me, you have to decide for you" (ID#16). Here, the DPHN (parenthood as natural and normal) has adopted the DPOC (choice; "I've chosen this path") to establish its dominance and create meaning about being a parent, working to counteract the DPHL (i.e., inverse countering).

Fear of Missing Out. Third, we propose a new dialogically contractive discursive practice – *fear of missing out* (FOMO) –in which the fear of missing the DRHN's promised life fulfillment drove formerly childfree parents to embrace the dominant discourse (the DRHN). For instance, one regretful parent lamented, "[Parenting] totally sucks. Life has been 100% worse and I wish I could drop this kid off at the fire house or police station. Let me tell you that you're definitely not missing out" (ID#65). FOMO is a contractive practice because it drove the formerly childfree to have children, reifying the dominant discourse (the DRHN) and closing alternative perspectives about being a parent. In another example, a regretful mother explained, "I don't know why I thought I would regret NOT becoming a mother, because I endlessly regret becoming one" (ID#34). Here, this mother is giving voice to the DPHN by discussing her fear that she would regret NOT having children (FOMO). This FOMO was a catalyst for her giving voice to the DPHN, and then later giving voice to the DPHL in her lived experience of parenthood and subsequent regret.

Diachronic Separation. Regretful parents gave voice to different discourses over time, and these discourses changed in dominance over time (*spiraling inversion*). Specifically, the dominance of the DPHN and DPHL fluctuated moving from parenting is hell to parenting is heaven, then back to parenting is hell. To illustrate, one regretful mother explained, "I never wanted a kid. I thought I did…but I was wrong. I had been told my whole life I was abnormal…incompetent…But by having a baby, I could prove that I was normal, competent…" (ID#24). Here, this mother moves from the DPHL (never wanting children), to the DPHN (parenthood is normal and natural), and back to the DPHL again (parenthood is hell). What is particularly notable about this flipflopping is the way the lived experience of parenting confirmed, albeit too late, parents' discursive alignment with the DPHL. Thus, these regretful parent utterances illustrate a robust process through which meaning changes over time as a product of contractive practices (e.g., FOMO) and lived experience (articulated via DPHL).

Synchronic Interplay. We identified three forms of synchronic interplay: (a) countering, (b) negating, and (c) *allying*, which we offer as a new form of triadic synchronic interplay.

Countering. First, *countering* occurred when the DPHL acknowledged the DPHN only to dismiss it. One regretful parent noted, "I imagined I would have that oxytocin love bonding thing when she was born. There was none of that. Just terror that I was now responsible for a tiny defenseless thing in need of mountains of constant care" (ID#29). In this example, the realities of hard work reject the presumed natural and fulling joys of parenthood. Another father opined, "I would never dream of hurting my son…But I do not love him. I don't even LIKE him. I will change his nappy, play with him, feed him. But I don't enjoy it… I count the hours until he goes back to his mum" (ID#36). Again, the labor that is the hallmark of the DPHL stands up to the unspoken expectation that a parent would (a) love his children, (b) like his children, and (c) derive satisfaction from fulling the parenting role. Overall, parents voiced utterances that acknowledged the dominant DPHN, especially considering so many discussed the pressure they felt to have children in

the first place. The promise of parenthood, however, did not bear out, and the dominance shifted over time to privilege the DPHL.

Negating. Second, *negating* occurred when the DPHL outright rejected the DPHN. One regretful parent exclaimed, "You CAN regret having kids! Most people are just ashamed to admit it! We've been programmed to never show any regret when it comes to our kids. But the fact is, kids just aren't for everyone" (ID#46). What is particularly evocative about this exemplar is the force with which this utterance rejects the DPHN as illustrated both verbally and nonverbally through the capitalization and punction marks. Indeed, this utterance (via the DPHL) is proverbially shouting down the DPHN (i.e., parenting is natural). Indeed, negating was manifest throughout the corpus. One regretful parent shared, "Kids are exhausting and infuriating. The effort it takes to raise a child is ridiculous, and if it's not for you then you will never feel like it's fulfilling" (ID#16). In this utterance, the DPHL rejects each component of the DPHN, calling out the costs of parenting to combat assumptions about it being natural, rejecting parenting as fulfilling, and reinforcing the belief that everyone will want a child eventually.

Allying. Finally, we introduce *allying* as a new form of triadic synchronic interplay. Whereas *mobbing* is a form of triadic interplay which occurs to shut down alternative perspectives, allying is instead a way for the marginalized discourse (here, the DPHL) to garner strength by co-opting a third discourse (i.e., the DPOC) to vie for dominance and power against the DPHN in creating meaning about being a parent. Put simply, parents reject the notion that not having children is hell by instead offering a rejoinder, "Hell is great, and I chose to be here!" Here, the marginalized discourse (the DPHL) is drawing upon the notion of choice (the DPOC) to increase its dominance in creating new meaning about being a parent. For instance, one regretful parent voiced the DPOC to reject the DPHN in favor of the DPHL:

> Friends want you to have a kid? Coworkers want you to have a kid? Parents want you to have a kid? Screw 'em. You are the one that has to shoulder the extra responsibility, not them. Your [partner] wants you to have a kid? Say no. If your relationship must end, so be it. Really, you need to look out for your own long-term happiness. (ID#7)

In this example, the DPHL allies itself with the DPOC to reject the DPHN's assumptions that everyone should have children. In another example, a regretful parent laments, "I envy those who waited before embarking on this journey. I envy those who thought for more than 5 seconds, those who thought things through. But I didn't. And so here I am." (ID#67)." By shifting focus to individual choice, nothing is natural or normal. This echoes beliefs about the role choice plays in Christian religious ideology. No one is predestined for heaven or hell, rather choices define one's destination. Another regretful parent illustrates, "Let me confirm this to you all: you are making a great decision for yourselves, and all of that bullshit that parents say to you is wrong" (ID#19). The DPOC reassures the DPHL that it is "on the right track" regardless of the DPHN. Thus, allying

works inversely to mobbing by illustrating how the marginalized discourse can partner with a third discourse to garner strength and vie for dominance.

Dialogic Transformation. Finally, we identified a discursive hybrid that merged DPHN, DPHL, DPOC which we call *purgatory* (i.e., the meaning of parenthood is being stuck between heaven *and* hell). One regretful parent explained, "If your kid dies (and I fantasize about this) - your life is over…I hate being a mother - but if he were gone, I would be a soulless shell…it would destroy me…yet, I hate every second of [mother-hood]" (ID#50). Here, this parent hates motherhood and fantasizes about her child dying (DPHL), but also recognizes that her life would be ruined without her child (DPHN). Hence, the DPHL and DPHN binary is transformed here into something new altogether – purgatory, and thus so too may no longer co-opt the DPOC (choice) to their side in this battle for dominance. When it comes to parenting, this hybrid suggests that you're damned if you do, and damned if you don't. Of note, by fusing the DPHN and DPHL, the DPOC loses its power as the ultimate tiebreaker. As Baxter (2011) explains, *discursive transformation* is an "idealized discursive moment of dialogue, discourses lose their zero-sum relation of opposition and become open to the possibility of newly emergent meanings" (p. 139). Thus, here, purgatory represents a potentially unsatisfactory possibility to transcend the heaven or hell binary.

Discussion

This study has illuminated the discourses that animate the meaning of being a parent from the perspective of parents who regret having children and has analyzed those discourses for discursive interplay. Three discourses competed across the continuum of interplay which include the centripetal Discourse of Parenting as Heaven (DPHN), the centrifugal Discourage of Parenting as Hell (DPHL), and an unaligned Discourse of Parenting as the (Only) Choice (DPOC). This final unaligned discourse corresponds to existing research that suggests that struggling with the idea of choice pervaded accounts of Israeli women who regretted becoming mothers (Donath, 2015a; 2015b, 2017). Overall, three con-tractive practices worked to reify the DPHN including a new one we labeled, the fear of missing out (FOMO). In addition, we identified a dynamic pattern of diachronic sepa-ration which we detail below.

Next, three forms of synchronic interplay emerged, including countering, negating, a new one we label allying. Although we will discuss allying at length, we also want to call attention to the emphatic declarations that negated the DPHN. Unlike other populations overwhelmed by dominant meanings of parenthood (e.g., women with prenatal and postpartum depression; Scharp & Thomas, 2017), regretful parents went as far as to utter that they did not love their children. Such disclosures were likely made possible by the/r/childfree subreddit, which enables users to anonymously discuss the benefits of child-freedom and bans users from promoting pronatalism (Hintz & Brown, 2020). This departure from existing research suggests that there might be something inherently different when more than two discourses are at play, such that multiple discourses create new possibilities that are not available when one two discourses compete. Finally, we

identified one discursive hybrid where all three discourses interacted to create a new meaning of parenting is a lose-lose endeavor. As Bakhtin (1984) theorized, transformation marks the idealized dialogue in which one discourse, "no longer oppressively dominates the others … it loses its composure and confidence, becomes agitated, internally un-decided and two-faced" (p. 198). Although the new meaning of parenting is not idealized per se, this marks the first time, we are aware, of a triadic hybrid in which all three discourses lost their footing to form something new. With this implication in mind, we now address the major theoretical advancements to extend RDT.

Theoretical Implications

Multiple robust contributions serve to advance RDT. Our study introduces two new terms that could enhance future of RDT research including FOMO and allying. Yet, what is most important about these concepts is not that they illustrate a new contractive practice and form of synchronic interplay, but rather *how* they function in the meaning making process.

Taken one at a time, FOMO not only emphasizes the importance of a dominant discourse, but in this study was the catalyst that inspired a change of dominance over time (i.e., diachronic separation). Existing RDT studies typically depict a process where an utterance, once aligned with the dominant discourse changes its allegiance to the mar-ginalized discourse (e.g., Prentice, 2009). Yet, in this study, utterances begin aligned to the marginalized discourse, flip to the dominant discourse (e.g., Moore, 2018), and then flop back to the marginalized one. By reverting to the marginalized position, diachronic separation gains more momentum because it now calls on lived experience as a catalyst for rejecting the dominant discourse. Thus, instead of manifesting as a change of heart or mind, this marginal > dominant > marginal spiraling inversion illustrates (a) the ways that contractive practices (via FOMO) change the dominance of meaning and how (b) lived experience (via DPHL) can reposition a dominant discourse as a regret from which others can learn and avoid. Thus, we make an important contribution to RDT by illustrating not only that diachronic separation can occur, but how it occurs and to what end.

Next, allying calls attention to the promise of exploring the meaning making process of at least three discourses. To date, very few RDT studies attempt to explore triadic interplay (see Scharp & Thomas, 2020, for an exception), yet many discourses could animate the meaning of a semantic object. Yet, most analytic techniques outlined in contrapuntal analysis assume that only two discourses are competing. In introducing allying, we argue that, in instances of more than two discourses, discourses might form coalitions as they vie for dominance. Like the contractive practice of mobbing in which the dominant discourse co-opts other recognizable ideologies toward reifying itself, allying works in the opposite way. The addition of a third party makes it more difficult for an otherwise dominant discourse to reign unchecked. Thus, allying serves as an important theoretical and methodological advancement that affords researchers another analytical tool to account for more complex analyses. Consequently, above and beyond applying RDT to a new context, we extend the theory, meeting the second goal of this study, to introduce and depict both new mechanism for reification and resistance as well as how they constrain and create potential for new meaning.

Practical Applications

As with all critical research, our study also speaks to practice. For those trying to decide whether to becoming parents (i.e., fencesitters), our study calls out the ways FOMO can move people toward a dominant position just for the sake of joining the crowd. By better understanding potential motivations for their actions, people might be more inclined to make value-concordant, autonomous reproductive decisions (Schaubroeck & Hens, 2017). Understanding how FOMO permeates the cultural imaginary also has implications for voluntarily childfree women and the formidable obstacles they face in discussing family planning (Durham & Braithwaite, 2009) and in procuring voluntary sterilization (Hintz, 2022; Moore, 2021; Rauscher & Durham, 2015). The denial of voluntary sterilization as a woman's preferred form of contraception goes against the ethical guidelines of governing medical bodies (e.g., American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists [ACOG], 2020), yet is pervasive (Richie, 2013). As such, doctors, and medical educators, should consider the consequences of refusing women's contraceptive choices, especially considering more than 30% of U.S. women alone no longer have access to abortion as of August 2022 (Shepherd et al., 2022). Reproductive counseling interactions often already discuss the likelihood of patients regretting the decision *not* to have children (ACOG, 2020). These findings suggest that the weight of regretting the decision to *have* children should also be considered equally. Indeed, our findings then also hold relevance for policymakers who are drafting and enacting legislation affecting reproductive decision-making in the U.S. today.

Limitations, Directions for Future Research, and Conclusion

As with all research, this study has limitations which we will discuss. Even though Reddit data affords high quality unadulterated accounts of people's experiences told their way (Hintz & Betts, 2022), the platform is anonymous and actively eliminates most demographic information. Demographic information can be particularly useful in RDT research given how important context is to the meaning making process (Baxter, 2011). Another limitation of this study is that although attuned to the potential for new forms of reification and resistance as well as the ways those functioned in the meaning making process, there is no way to determine whether these data have exhausted what is possible. This is especially true given that the /r/childfree subreddit suppresses alternative perspectives as a matter of forum policy. In fact, we argue that FOMO and allying are far from completing what types of contractive and expansive practices are possible. In the future, scholars using RDT should consider the multiple ways discourses can complete across and within utterances. Finally, we contend that it would be useful for researchers to explore the meaning of regret more fully. Although research that suggests regret is ubiquitously negative, an alternative study reveals that out of a variety of negative emotions (e.g., anger, disappointment, disgust, shame, etc.), people perceive regret to be beneficial (Jeffries & Konnert, 2002; Saffrey et al., 2008). Specifically, people reported that regret helped them (a) make sense of past experiences, (b) spur them to action, (c) gain insights into themselves, and (d) preserve social harmony. Given the ambivalence surrounding

regret as a semantic object, and that ambivalence is a robust warrant for using RDT, scholars should consider how regret might be a productive force inspiring people to action in different contexts.

Considering the heuristic value of our findings, we argue that this study is another example of how context (i.e., regretful parents) contributes to the web of meaning around particular semantic objects. Put differently, although researchers have long been interested in what it means to be a parent and the meaning of the parent-child relationship, new contexts provide alternative discourses (e.g., DPHL) that overthrow taken-for-granted ideologies that disenfranchise groups. Thus, this study bolsters existing RDT research calling attention to the ways that pronatalism as a totalizing value can be problematic. This study also advances RDT by illustrating how emergent concepts drive the meaning making process through diachronic separation and synchronic interplay. Taken together, we advance the postmodern critical project by exposing the misconceptions about the meaning of parenthood which hold real consequence for how people live their lives.

Declaration of conflicting interests

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Open research statement

As part of IARR's encouragement of open research practices, the author(s) have provided the following information: This research was not pre-registered. The data used in the research are available. The data can be obtained on the /r/childfree wiki on Reddit: https://www.reddit.com/r/childfree/wiki/index/. The materials used in the research are available. The materials can be obtained on the /r/childfree wiki on Reddit: https://www.reddit.com/r/childfree/wiki/index/.

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