Power Dynamics in Couples' Communication about Their Fertility Decision-Making Processes in the Netherlands

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Abstract: Fertility research often focuses on women only but, in the case of couples, fertility can also be considered an outcome of a joint fertility decision-making process. Over time, couples interact, communicate and negotiate their individual beliefs and desires in order to create shared fertility reasoning, motivations and intentions. This paper aims to better understand the power dynamics that influence this process as observed in couples' verbal and nonverbal communication about their fertility decision-making processes in the Netherlands. Dyadic in-depth interviews were conducted with 21 couples. Participants were aged 26-54 years old and purposively recruited to represent a wide variety of background characteristics. The interviews took 2 hours and 29 minutes on average, and they were audio and video recorded and transcribed verbatim. The preliminary findings show that couples can find it difficult to discuss divergent fertility desires. (Gendered) power dynamics and interdependency could diminish verbal communication and make it difficult for partners to upkeep their individual reproductive autonomy. However, commitment, trust and 'gunnen' (in Dutch) in the relationship; aiming at maximising the couple or family level wellbeing; and together exploring various scenarios rather than taking opposite, firm stances seem to positively contribute to the joint fertility decision-making process.