

ANALYSIS OF DECISION MAKING OF MARRIED COUPLES WHO CHOOSE CHILDFREE AND UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL STIGMA IN SOCIETY

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Enter : 13-09-2024, revision: 17-10-2024, accepted for publication : 11-11-2024

ABSTRACT

Giving birth and having a child is a basic human nature by heterosexual maturity. In addition, parents have an important role to make a happy and meaningful life. So, married couples often want to have children. But after time that value changes and there's a new value which is childfree. Childfree is a person's choice to not have children voluntarily. But, childfree is uncommon in Indonesia. That's why people who choose to be childfree have a negative stigma from society. The aim of our research is to understand the underlying factors for choosing a childfree lifestyle, the causes of negative stigma from society, and the impact of society views and stigma on couples self-perception. In our study, we conducted interviews with two married couples (2 men and 2 women). Our research uses the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, which is a research method that combines phenomenology, hermeneutic philosophy, and is related to subjective experience. Based on our research, the result shows that the reason couples choose to be childfree are due to physical, financial, and mental readiness to have children. Our participant said that by choosing childfree, they can be more free because they don't have to worry about their kids, saving more money, and having a lot more time with their partner. Socially, women tend to face harsher stigma compared to men. But, stigma or negative views doesn't affect both couples. Therefore, the reasons why someone chooses to be childfree are health, financial and mental readiness.

Keywords: decision making factors, social stigma, childfree

1. PREFACE

One of the purposes of human existence is to reproduce and continue the lineage. Giving birth to a child is fundamental to normal development through heterosexual adulthood, while in addition parents are considered important in creating a happy and meaningful life (Morison et al., 2016). Therefore, married couples usually long for a child in their lives. Indonesia is a country that is classified as a pro-natalist country with a total fertility rate of 2.26 and 93% of Indonesian believe that the presence of children is important in marriage (Tanaka & Johnson, 2016). In social life in Indonesia itself, children are considered to bring fortune in married life. The presence of biological children is considered to provide a sense of security when parents are elderly (Nauck, 2014; Park & Cho, 2011) and provides psychological, cultural and religious benefits (Fahmi & Pinem, 2018).

Childfree is a personal decision where after careful consideration a couple will decide not to have children, either biologically or through adoption. For developed countries, such as

Germany and Japan, childfree is a common thing, and many married couples have become childfree (Putri & Fitriasia, 2023). However, along with the development of social media, childfree culture has begun to enter Indonesia (Nasution, 2017), so that some people in Indonesia in early adulthood have begun to adopt this culture thus began to make it a contemporary trend (Jenuri et al., 2022). The reasons someone chooses to be childfree is because they feel unsuited to being a parent and someone who interacts with children in their professional work postpones having children because they are influenced by negative views after interacting with children. Another reason is the financial burden associated with having children (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012).

According to Yuniarti and Panuntun (2023) in BPS data, the increasing trend of the childfree phenomenon has a significant impact on the decline in the total fertility rate of women in Indonesia. The results of the National Socio-Economic Survey (SUSENAS) data by BPS, the percentage of childfree women in Indonesia is currently around 8% or almost equivalent to 71 thousand people. If this childfree phenomenon continues, it will result in the loss of certain generation segments in the population pyramid in Indonesia.

The decision to choose a childfree lifestyle will have both good and bad impacts on the country. One of the positive impacts is reduced education and health subsidies for children (Yuniarti & Panuntun, 2023). However, the negative impact is in the form of a decrease in birth rates which can result in an imbalance in the occupied population (Audinovic & Nugroho, 2023). The decision making of a couple to be childfree can be caused by biological factors, economic factors, and various other factors. This decision usually will be opposed by family and the surrounding community. In Indonesian society, couples or people who decide not to have children are usually criticized as selfish people who only think about themselves (Yuniarti & Panuntun, 2023). In addition, they are also labeled as irresponsible, materialistic, immature, and too focused on careers (Gillespie, 2003; Graham & Rich, 2012; Letherby, 2002 in Morison et al., 2016). According to Terry in Pasolong (2023) Decision making based on intuition is subjective and therefore easily influenced. Decision making based on experience is practical because it estimates the situation and takes into account the benefits and risks that arise from the decision. Decision making based on facts is characterized as reliable, solid, and trustworthy. On the other hand, decision making based on rationality is objective, logical, consistent, and more transparent which is achieved through a comprehensive understanding of all available alternatives and consequences. The mistakes that often occur in decision making are a lack of information received, a fear of making decisions, and not wanting to experiment in making decisions.

Women who chose to be childfree were found to receive more social conversations compared to women who have children (Mueller & Yoder, 1999). This is because Indonesian society views women as a mother, not only because of socio-economic but also because they are emotionally provided and reflect a marital relationship (Hird & Abshoff, 2000). However, in a research, Houseknecht (1977) showed that women who do not have children are significantly less likely to care about the negative social sanctions associated with their choice. Morison et al. (2016) asserts that although there are two types of rhetorical choices that allow them to choose childfree to manage and fight the social stigma that befalls them, it also allows for other stigmas (for example, against people who have children). Stigma occurs when labeling, negative stereotypes, exclusion, discrimination, and low status occur together in a power situation that allows these things to happen, a process that will be revealed (Lucas & Phelan, 2022). Frost (2011) shows that there is a large number of variations in how groups respond to

stressful experiences related to stigma. This is also one of the important efforts in the psychological study of stigma. The negative effects of stigma will be more neutral if individuals and groups are able to overcome stressful experiences related to stigma.

Childfree is also considered to reduce unemployment rates, the population density of the country, and lower the rate of early childhood mortality due to parent's unpreparedness in having children. In addition, being childfree can eliminate the selfish attitude of parents regarding the removal of the burden of responsibility for children, as children are often burdened when parents become elderly. The society that agrees with childfree also believes that this decision can reduce the risk of abandoned children because parents may not be able to provide a guaranteed life in raising a child. There are also groups in society who disagree with the decision to be childfree because they believe it has more harmful negative impacts, such as breaking the generational chain, which affects economic quality, community productivity, and human resources.

Besides impacting the population segment, being childfree is also viewed negatively because many people cannot experience the happiness of being a parent or a mother, it can cause conflicts in the family if there is no commitment, and it leads to feelings of loneliness and divorce due to the absence of children as a factor that strengthens the marital relationship.

In some study, Jamison et al. (1979) found that women who choose to be childfree tend to feel less happy and less satisfied by the age of 65. Similarly, men who choose to be childfree are often perceived more negatively compared to those with children. Some research reported that couples with children are psychologically healthier than childfree couples, especially for the husbands (Koropecj-Cox et al., 2015). Meanwhile, couples planning to be childfree are less likely to experience family warmth and are more prone to emotional issues, even though they remain happy in their marriages (Koropecj-Cox et al., 2015).

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, which is a research method that combines phenomenology, hermeneutic philosophy, and is related to subjective experiences. Just like phenomenological psychology where researchers study the subjective experiences of individuals. IPA accepts that the research process is fundamentally hermeneutic, where both the researcher and the research participants engage in interpretative activities constrained by shared social and cultural contexts (Frost, 2011). The researcher adopts a phenomenological method approach because it allows for a closer examination of the conditions and a better understanding of the individual's subjective experience. The sampling technique in this study is criterion sampling, which is part of purposeful sampling. The researcher used this sampling technique because it studies and reviews all cases that meet several predetermined criteria (Patton, 2014).

This research involves 4 participants, consisting of 2 married couples who have chosen to be childfree, with a marriage duration ranging from 3 to 10 years, residing in Jabodetabek. The data collection method used in this research is the interview method in the form of semi-structured interviews. The interview was conducted over a period of approximately 15 minutes to 1.5 hours and recorded using an audio recorder as a form of documentation. The results of the interview were then analyzed for validity using the data source triangulation technique to examine data related to the research problem. The processing and analysis techniques of the interview data were conducted using the criterion sampling technique, which falls under

purposeful sampling (Frost, 2011).

Samples

The sample was made up of childfree couples living in Jakarta, including 2 participants consisting of 1 husband and 1 wife with a marriage age range of 3 to 10 years. Participants ranged in age from 30 to 37 years with an average age of 32 years. Participants have the same level of education. 2 participants were located through purposive sampling.

Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews were used as the method of data collection. First, the researcher prepared an interview guideline containing questions related to the research topic. Interview questions include common questions for couples, experiences of living a childfree life, factors that influence the decision to be childfree, the relationship between the decision and family, the relationship between the decision and ethnicity and religion, the relationship between the decision and the views of the surrounding community, and social stigma faced by childfree couples.

Interviews in this study were conducted offline at the participant's residence and online interviews. The interview process began with the participant filling out an informed consent first and continued by asking questions according to the interview guideline prepared by the researcher. The interview was conducted approximately 15 minutes to 1.5 hours and the results of the interview were validated using data source triangulation techniques to test data related to the research problem.

First, the researcher made verbatim from the data collected through the results of participant interview recordings. After that, the researcher created a coding table to group each participant's statement into a subtheme category. Then, the researcher linked subthemes that had the same topic and categorized them into a major theme. Finally, the researcher made conclusions based on the themes and sub-themes that had been created.

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3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In our research, after the interview process, it was found that both participants made decisions based on facts, while the other based on experience. Based on the aforementioned facts, there is also the health fact that participant 1 is experiencing Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS), a condition where individuals have difficulty conceiving. Participant 1 has also made several efforts such as going for a check-up with an obstetrician and taking some vitamins recommended by the doctor, but so far there have been no results. So that Participant 1 accepts

the health condition or fact they are experiencing and immediately discusses it with their partner, so they can then make the decision to live a childfree life. With this, it can be understood that participant 1 is experiencing involuntary childlessness.

In addition to being based on facts, Participant 2, during the interview, shared experiences related to their reasons for choosing a childfree life. Initially, Participant 2 was indeed interested in young children, but over time, Participant 2 has become increasingly unsure of themselves when it comes to becoming a parent in the future. Thus, in the end, Participant 2 decided to be childfree after having a long and thorough discussion with their partner. Therefore, based on both facts from our interview results, this research aligns with the decision-making theory, where a person can make a decision that is singular, addressing only one problem, or multiple, addressing several problems. This is also the case for participant 4, because participants feel that she's not ready and feel children are a burden for her and her career. The last is Participant 3, who chose to accept being childfree because participant's partners are having trouble having children and participants don't think it is a problem.

The decision-making theory is used to help explain why couples choose a childfree life based on certain factors. According to Terry (as cited in Pasolong, 2023), decision making is a decision-making process that has several foundations, particularly intuition, experience, facts, and rationality. After conducting the interview process, the researcher can see that both participants made decisions based on facts, while the other based on experience.

The fact is, like our first participant who experiences Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) or a condition where individuals have difficulty getting pregnant. Thus, participants 1 and 3 fall into the category of involuntary childless. Involuntary childlessness itself is a situation where a couple who intends to have children cannot have children due to being affected by a certain condition. (Patnani et al., as cited in Komala & W., 2022).

Other literature also defines involuntary childlessness as a condition where individuals or couples intend to continue their lineage but are unable to have children due to issues generally caused by infertility in the couple (Roy et al., as cited in Sari & Wideasavitri, 2018). The results of this study align with another study by Sari and Wideasavitri (2018) which states that involuntary childlessness occurs due to health-related factors, where participants in that study also experienced Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS).

The participant holds an opinion consistent with other research, namely that the participant's mental unpreparedness to become a parent is the only factor influencing Participant 2 and 4's decision to be childfree. The assumption conveyed by the participants is that married adults usually manage their marriages with roles as parents, workers, household chores, kinship, friendships, and also time for themselves, where this complexity is seen as potentially creating stress, conflict, and overload (Netemeyer et al., 1996).

Based on interviews and the researcher's analysis, both participants made dual decisions, as they chose childfree to solve problems. Examples of problem-solving include economic burdens, parental responsibilities and roles, and health issues. Additionally, the decision to go childfree was also based on the experiences and perspectives of both participants, which led them to choose childfree.

Based on the journal *Psychology of Women Quarterly* (2016), it was found that someone who

chooses to be childfree is stigmatized by society, such as being seen as lacking, damaged, and selfish. Additionally, the stigma of being childfree is also influenced by societal norms, culture, and gender roles. The results of the research conducted by Houseknecht (1977) state that women who decide to be childfree do not care about the negative social reactions they receive. The research aligns with what participant 1 and 4 said, where the participant does not pay attention to others' responses and just lets them be.

Added to this is the opinion that being childfree is considered a deviation from social norms (Morison & Macleod, as cited in Morison et al., 2016) because it is seen as selfish (Simon, 1975) or hedonistic and irresponsible (Peck & Senderowitz, 1974). This aligns with the stigma experienced by one of the participants that if they do not have children, their marriage will not be strong and their decision will be questioned by society.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research, both of the partners interviewed are not affected by social stigma or negative thoughts from their relatives, as their decision making is grounded in mutual discussions and independent reasoning without external influence or pressure. Couples decision making is also based on mutual consideration, depending on the unique conditions of each couple. Same as both couples, even their experiences were different such as physical health or based on the couple's mentality as a parents. This autonomy in decision-making reflects a deep understanding and respect between the partners, as they prioritize their shared values and personal circumstances over societal expectations. For example, despite the couple dealing with physical health challenges or struggling with mental readiness for parenting, the couples consistently upheld a shared commitment to their decision to remain childfree.

Even when faced with negative sentiments or judgmental comments from certain segments of society, particularly targeting the wives, both partners show resilience by choosing not to engage or respond. This approach underscores their commitment to their decision and their ability to maintain emotional well-being by not allowing societal negativity to interfere with their relationship or life choices. By focusing on their partnership and shared understanding, they navigate societal pressures with confidence and composure.

Future researches are encouraged to provide additional insights into the childfree phenomenon, which remains underexplored. It is recommended that future studies seek comprehensive findings from couples who choose to be childfree with more diverse cultural backgrounds and different educational backgrounds among each couple. Additionally, the further development of decision-making theory is suggested to reflect current trends and give broader perspectives.

Acknowledgement

Firstly, we would like to thank Mrs. Fransisca Iriani R. Dewi, our lecturer. Without her advice, support, and contribution, this journal would not have been possible. We sincerely appreciate the time and effort she invested in mentoring us, and her knowledge and helpful input have greatly influenced to finish this article. Second, we would like to express our gratitude to Tarumanagara University for providing the facilities, essential resources, and supportive academic atmosphere that supported our study. We also want to thank our friends, who have been an ongoing source of inspiration and support during our research. Lastly, we would like to sincerely thank all of the participants who so kindly gave of their time and expertise by consenting to be interviewed so this study can be finished.

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