

Childfree Men: The Reasons Behind the Decision

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Abstract

Childfree is a phenomenon that has been popular since the 1970s and is becoming more common in a number of nations, including Asia. Childfree has recently gained popularity among Indonesians. As a patriarchal culture, the majority of Indonesians subscribe to pro-natalism, making childfree a taboo subject to discuss or even make a choice. Surprisingly, when stated by women, the decision to be childless is highly condemned by society. Meanwhile, when males express their intention to be childless, society tends to laud individuals involved. As a result, the researcher hopes to learn more about the factors that influence men's decisions to be childless in Indonesia through this research. As a data collection strategy, this study used an exploratory qualitative approach, employing interpretive phenomenology methodologies, and conducting interviews with four individuals. The findings revealed being childfree was selected based on both internal and environmental influences. The experiences of participants in choosing childfree marriage can then be viewed via symbolic interactionism theory by Herbert Blumer.

Keywords: childfree, pro-natalism, voluntary childless, symbolic interactionism, taboo subject

Introduction

At the very beginning, the childfree movement was known as voluntary childlessness and was closely associated with the feminist movement in the 1970s (Blackstone, 2019). Dr. Amy Blackstone discusses in his book how the feminist movement of that year played an important role in popularizing the concept of voluntary childlessness, and how this concept finally expanded and spread to many countries throughout the world.

The book "The Baby Trap" by Ellen Peck, published in 1971, was one of the first publications that inspired the childfree movement. Peck noted in Blackstone (2019) that when babies are prioritized, adults are de-emphasized. Because a woman is viewed as a

means to an end (propagating the species), she is not regarded as beautiful, vivacious, or valued in and of herself. And a man may be viewed as less of a person if he is only perceived as a provider.

Since then, being voluntarily childless has become a phenomenon that has persisted to the present day. According to US Census Bureau data, the percentage of childless couples tripled from 1967 to 1971, rising from 1.3% to 3.9% (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008). Furthermore, according to Agrillo and Nelini (2008), figures from the National Center for Health Statistics 2002 show that approximately 19% of women aged 40 and 29% of women aged 30 do not have children.

According to a 2017 survey, the number of couples in the United States who did not wish

to have children increased by 20% between the mid-1970s and the early 2000s (Frejka, 2017). According to Michigan State University research, 21.64%, or up to 1.7 million people in Michigan, have elected to be childfree (Bornes, 2022). Furthermore, experts believe that because the Michigan population is similar to that of the United States, the research findings can be read as 50-60 million Americans deciding to be childfree.

In line with the conducted survey and research above, Harris Interactive and the Archbridge Institute (2022) discovered that personal financial concerns account for 33% of the reasons why men do not want children. In the meantime, 42% of women said they wanted to keep their personal freedom. This is further reinforced by research findings that show that couples without children are happier and more satisfied with their lives, as they encounter fewer psychological troubles than parents (Hansen, 2012). Furthermore, in England and Wales 50.1% of women aged 30 decided not to have children in 2020 (Census 2021, 2022).

The childfree phenomenon is spreading not only in the United States, but also in Asian countries with collectivist customs such as Japan and South Korea. This is demonstrated by the fact that the birth rate in these countries keeps declining the following year. According to Japanese Ministry of Health figures, Japan's birth rate reached the lowest record in 2022, with only 799,728 births (Yeung & Maruyama, 2023). Even in South Korea, the birth rate was lower than the mortality rate in 2022, with 249,000 births and 372,800 deaths (Yeung & Bae, 2023).

In Indonesia, many couples appear to have made the decision to be childfree even before the childfree phenomenon went viral on social media (Husada, 2023). According to BBC News Indonesia, Devie Rahmawati, a Social Observer University of Indonesia, reports that there are actually many married couples in Indonesia who live their lives without children in secret (Husada, 2023).

Although there is no specific survey that measures the number of married couples who choose to be childfree, the childfree trend in Indonesia is frequently increasing, as seen from the increasing number of childfree communities. In Instagram, for example, there are @childfreelife.id, @childfreemilenialindonesia, @childfree_id, and @childfreeindonesia. At the same time,

data from the World Bank Trend reveals that Indonesia's birth rate keeps declining year after year. This data is further supported by the findings of a BPS census, which indicates a drop in population growth rate from 2010 to 2020, from 0.24% to 0.24% compared to the prior decade (Media Indonesia, 2021).

Unfortunately, the decision to be childfree is still considered taboo as the majority of Indonesians believe that the goal of marriage is to have children. According to Tanaka and Johnson in Patnani et al. (2021), 93% of Indonesians believe the existence of children is essential in marriage. Having children in marriage has been viewed as proof of male virility in the form of children, as well as the quality of a woman's motherhood in the form of birthing (Dewi, 2014).

Aside from being a symbol of virility, fertility, and thriving, children in Indonesian society have the function of being descendants, comforters in the family, gifts and mandates from God, and helping their parents in this world and in the afterlife (Moeloe in Hapsari & Septiani, 2015). In fact, many people believe that the more children they have, the more prosperous they will be. These expectations frequently generate social pressure for couples to marry soon and have children after marriage, and if they do not, the marriage is considered imperfect. This conveys Indonesia's pro-natalist stance (Patnani et al., 2021).

The prominence of pro-natalism itself is a byproduct of Indonesia's patriarchal culture. According to statistics from the Global Gender Gap Report (2022), Indonesia ranks 92 out of 146 countries with a gender inequality index score of 0.687 (on a scale of 0-1). The negative stigma attached to Indonesian women who choose to be childless stems from patriarchal culture's emphasis on women's roles as mothers (Rohmaniyah in Mingkase & Rohmaniyah, 2022).

Mingkase and Rohmaniyah (2022) then discovered a double standard in the childfree phenomena. This is illustrated by the remarks of angry Twitter users who are upset that society glorifies the opinion of one male public figure in Indonesia who decides to leave the decision of whether or not to have children exclusively to his wife. Meanwhile, when women declared their intention not to have children, society reacted negatively.

In their study on double standards in the context of voluntary childlessness in Europe,

Rijken and Merz (2014) discovered that in nations with a high level of gender equality, more women show rejection of men who choose to be childfree. Meanwhile, mere a few women rejected other women who chose childlessness. Furthermore, the research findings reveal that the higher the level of gender equality, the stronger the double standard in favor of women when it comes to childfree decisions. Double standards, which are normally damaging to women, actually place additional pressure on men in the context of voluntary childlessness (Rijken & Merz, 2014).

The finding of this study differs significantly from the findings of Mingkase and Rohmaniyah's (2022) study on Indonesian attitudes toward the childfree phenomena. According to the study's findings, the gender construction in Indonesia, which emphasizes women's nature as the owner of the womb, exposes more women to negative comments regarding childfree options than men (Mingkase & Rohmaniyah, 2022).

Based on the explanation above, this research is carried out to discover and comprehend the meaning of Indonesian men regarding their decision to be childfree. Men are the primary decision makers and leaders of families in patriarchal cultures. In Indonesia, unlike in Europe, males who choose not to have children face less social pressure and disdain than women. Therefore, this study will look into the experiences of men in Indonesia in making childfree decisions.

Theoretical Framework

Childfree

According to Tessarolo in Agrillo & Nelini (2008), the word "childfree" was used in 1972 by the National Organization for Non-Parents to describe someone who has no plans or desire to have children. Childfree differs from childless, which refers to those who wish to have children but are unable to due to biological reasons. Corbett noted in Mingkase & Rohmaniyah (2022) that childless people receive more understanding from society than childfree people, because childfree is a lifestyle choice.

Previous studies on voluntary childlessness have been undertaken since the 1970s, with research findings emphasizing the effects of significant changes in women's social and economic realities since the 1970s (Waren

& Pals, 2013). In his book, Blackstone (2019) quotes Ellen Peck's 1972 editorial in the New York Times, which declared the death of motherhood. Peck joined in a particular initiative to raise awareness about the position of parents as a choice, and the choice not to become parents is a worthy thing to choose (Blackstone, 2019).

Simultaneously, as family planning choices evolve, more and more women have the freedom to select when, how, and how many children they want. This newfound independence raises understanding that childbearing is a choice rather than a fate (Blackstone, 2019). As Jenna Healey explained, articles about childfree were influenced more by the sexual revolution than by the feminist movement's support. However, greater awareness of the effect of overpopulation in the 1960s, as well as the second wave of feminist movements in the 1960s and 1970s, aided the establishment of the childfree movement (Blackstone, 2019).

Entering the 1990s, studies on voluntary childlessness began to investigate the influence of religion in the decision not to have children, as demonstrated by Heaton et al. (1992). Although religious distinctions have decreased, religion nevertheless had an impact on people's decisions not to have children at the time (Jacobson & Heaton, 1991). A decade later, as the population got older without children, the study's focus evolved, as indicated by research by Albertini and Kohli (2009), Umberson et al. (2010), and Wenger (2009).

As time passed and the number of people who chose not to have children increased, researchers began to adopt the term childfree as a more acceptable and accurate way to characterize the decision not to have children (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012). As a result, nowadays, the decision not to have children is referred to as being childless by choice or being childfree.

Individuals and couples can be characterized as articulators of voluntary childless and postponers based on how they arrive at their decision to remain childfree (Callan, 1984; Veevers, 1980).

Articulators. The articulators make the decision not to have children or childfree before marriage. On the other hand, they are believed to be more negative towards child-centered living and to support the anti-natalist worldview.

Postponers. The childfree decision is the consequence of a temporary decision to postpone having children while still appreciating the inherent benefit of having children.

Regardless of the classification above, being childless is still considered a deviant decision. In his research, Park (2002) discovered that pro-natalism society leads to a negative judgment of childfree choices (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012).

Pro-natalism

Peck and Senderowitz (1974) in McCutcheon (2020) define pro-natalism as an attitude or policy that honors parents and fosters reproduction. Pro-natalism itself has been linked to normative expectations of parenthood and negative assessments of childfree choices.

The fundamental assumption of pro-natalism is that having children is normal and basic in human inclinations and biology. Furthermore, childbirth is regarded as an important developmental milestone in heterosexual adults as well as a crucial marker of gender development. The final assumption, pro-natalism, considers parenting to be essential for living a happy and meaningful life (Morison & Macleod, 2015).

According to Heitlinger (1991) in (Morison & Macleod, 2015) pro-natalism operates on various levels:

Culturally. When giving birth to children and becoming a mother is considered natural and the essence of a woman's identity.

Ideologically. When the mandate of motherhood becomes a patriotic, ethnic, or eugenic duty.

Psychologically. When giving birth is identified with the level of personal micro aspirations, emotions, and rational/irrational decision making by women or partners.

At the level of population policy. When the state regulates reproductive dynamics directly or indirectly in order to influence cause and effect.

Thus, pro-natalism refers to the discursive and social processes at the sociocultural, interpersonal, and individual levels that occur when childbearing and reproduction are highly valued. As a result, becoming a parent is viewed as a requirement rather than an option, and most people believe that children are required to satisfy personal pleasure, with no thought given to not having

children (Meyers (2001) in Morison & Macleod, 2015).

Material and Methodology

The research was conducted in a qualitative and exploratory approach. This sort of qualitative research seeks to investigate and comprehend the meaning and meaning of individuals or groups in relation to a problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In Creswell and Poth (2018), Denzin and Lincoln define qualitative research as "studying and attempting to understand or interpret phenomena in one's meaning." This sort of qualitative research is then in agreement with the research that will be carried out since the researcher seeks to obtain the meaning and interpretation of the phenomena (his decision to be childfree) from the participant (male).

This research employs interpretive phenomenological approaches, that are sometimes referred to as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), dedicated to investigating how people comprehend their life experiences (J. Smith et al., 2009). To get participants' stories and understanding regarding their experiences in detail and depth, in-depth interviews are one of the best ways. In-depth interviews facilitate participants' stories, thoughts, and feelings about their experiences (J. Smith et al., 2009).

Result and Discussion

This study focuses on the topic of childlessness in Indonesia. This study shows the meanings and experiences of the participants as research subjects regarding the decision to be childfree in marriage in a pro-natalist society in Indonesia. There are four married participants who have a marriage age of above 25 and who have maturely decided not to have children in their marriage.

The identical questions about their decision to be childfree were asked to each of the participants utilizing in-depth interview data collecting method. The interview was also conducted online, via Google's Meet, and lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. The four participants are married men who decided to be childfree. The researcher found three subjects, namely A.P., Y.O., and A.M., through the Instagram community @childfree.id. Meanwhile, participant D.Z. was obtained with the assistance of relatives.

Searching for connections across emergent themes is the fourth stage in data analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Following the identification of a collection of themes in the interview transcripts, these topics are organized chronologically in the order in which they appear. This permits participants to be treated differently. To explore for similarities and connections between topics in the four subjects, the researcher chose to apply an abstraction technique.

Four participants candidly expressed their experiences and interpretations of childfree marriage decisions. Every person has varied perceptions and interpretations of something, in this case, childfree. Several meanings and symbols were discovered during the interview process. This is consistent with Herbert Blumer's idea of symbolic interactionism.

The following are the three fundamental concepts of symbolic communication theory (Griffin et al., 2019): (1) Individual acts based on the meaning they assign to the object in question. This meaning develops as a result of social contact or is passed down through culture; (2) Because meaning emerges through social interaction, it is not connected to objects. Individuals actively participate in social processes and interpret signals in various situations; (3) Individual perceptions of symbols are influenced by their own thought processes; individuals interpret existing symbols using personal interpretations influenced by experiences, values, conventions, and other situational factors.

As a result, researcher uses symbolic interactionism theory to examine how symbols such as factors influencing participants' decisions to choose childfree affect participants' perceptions and understanding of that choice. Symbolic interactionism, as employed by Coffey (2005) in his research, is used to analyze women as a social construction from the pro-natalist worldview.

According to the study's findings, two participants (D.Z. and Y.O.) opted to be childfree before marriage, while two others (A.P. and A.M.) decided to be childfree after marriage. If you look at the backgrounds of the four participants, you will notice that they all work in high-level positions and have a clear career path. D.Z. is a staff director, Y.O. is the CEO, A.M. is a maritime supplier, and A.P. is the proprietor of an online shop. All four hold

bachelor's degrees in various professions. This finding contradicts the findings of prior research by P'erez (2021) which found that voluntary childless males are substantially connected with economic loss and poorer job status.

However, this is consistent with the findings of Bachu's (1999) research, which discovered that childfree persons are better educated, work in professional and management professions, and have a higher income than parents. This data is consistent with the findings of a study which revealed that men aged 30-39 years with a university education were three times more likely than those with the lowest education level not to wish to have children (Ravanera & Beaujot, 2014).

When A.P. and A.M. married, they did not immediately decide to be childless. As a result, A.P. and A.M. are postponers because their childfree decision is the outcome of a temporary decision to postpone having children (Callan, 1984). According to the findings of a study, 14 out of 36 couples were postponers before opting not to have parents (Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2020). These couples were initially hesitant to become parents, but ultimately decided that they were happier without children and did not want to change that.

According to the findings of the study, A.P. and A.M. do not immediately plan and pressure to have children after marriage for various reasons. According to the findings of a study conducted by Bhambhani and Inbanathan (2020), postponer couples typically commit without a definite position on whether or not to have children in marriage, and instead prefer to wait and see what occurs next.

When people around A.P. start asking when they are going to have children, they become more confident, and after talking with their wife, who obviously also has the same fear, they decide not to have children at all. Unlike A.M., who chose to delay because they want to get to know their spouse better until they finally feel more at ease without children.

In the case of A.M., he and his wife decided to refrain from having children after two years of marriage. At first, A.M. simply followed his wife's wishes. He was not forcing his wife to give birth because he is fully aware that the burden will be significantly greater for

her. Hird and Abshoff (2000) also said in their research that women are in a position to be totally responsible for childfree decisions because it is women who physically conceive and give birth to children.

Unlike A.P. and A.M., two other individuals elected to be childless before marrying. As a result, D.Z. and Y.O. can be classified as articulators. Before marriage, articulators decide whether or not to have children (Callan, 1984). Although the decision was made before marriage, D.Z. and Y.O. were fortunate in that it was also in accordance with what their wives desired, thus the decision was ultimately the result of mutual agreement.

D.Z. made the childfree decision because he has not met his wife, whereas Y.O. made the decision before 2011. They made the decision while they were in their 30s. This finding is also consistent with the findings of Neal and Neal's research (2022), in which the majority of data samples claimed that they decided not to have children early on.

Several variables impact each participant before making the final decision not to have children in marriage. According to the findings of Smith's research, et al. (2020), the decision-making process for men not to have children is flexible and impacted by both intrinsic (internal) and extrinsic (external) elements. The researcher discovered that one of the participants had basic reasons for his childfree decision that stemmed from internal considerations. A.P. remarked that he lacked the instinct to become a father because he had little interest in small children. A.P. discovered that he was often cold to tiny children, so he decided that it was better not to have children at all than to raise and educate them half-heartedly.

This finding is consistent with the findings of Matthews and Desjardins' (2017) study, in which people conceptualize intentional childlessness as an intrinsic, rather than a choice. The findings of this study are also consistent with the concept of voluntary childlessness as a natural childfree status that is not based on choice (Peterson & Engwall, 2013).

Meanwhile, A.M.'s decision to postpone having children in marriage made him recognize that he was not an ideal figure to be a parent. He considers himself to be self-centered, egotistical, and impatient. Of course, this is inversely proportionate to the cultural

judgment of pronatalist society that parents should be unselfish (Park, 2002). A.M. is not alone in feeling this way. Park and College (2005) discovered that men have the same anxieties about their parenting abilities as women.

Other research has explained that, in addition to the internal factors that influence childfree decisions, individual interpretations of experiences gained through their families of origin provide examples of the advantages and disadvantages of choosing to have children, which ultimately influence their final decision (Park & College, 2005). This corresponds to one of the motivations for the two participants (D.Z. and Y.O.) in deciding to be childless.

Y.O. stated that he had witnessed his extended family's marriage since he was a toddler. Many families who are not ready to have children end up having them. From there, Y.O. began to experience worry and felt that there was something wrong with the marriage system when it came to having children. The family also advised Y.O. to reconsider the numerous factors to consider if he wishes to have children.

The same thing happened to D.Z., who grew up without a father or mother figure to guide him through his adolescence and into maturity. Because of these circumstances, D.Z. was forced to live with other family members, exposing him to how their lives were affected by the presence of children. This gave rise to D.Z.'s opinion that children are expensive and made it one of the considerations.

Finally, the study's findings contradicted earlier research findings indicating men frequently admit to choosing childlessness for financial reasons (Waren & Pals, 2013). Only one participant (D.Z.) in this survey mentioned financial concerns as a motivating motivation for childfreeness, whereas the other three participants mentioned external influences such as the environment and internal self.

In addition to that, the three participants (D.Z., A.P., and Y.O.) claimed that another reason they chose to remain childfree was that having children required a long commitment, and two of them were hesitant to commit themselves to such a commitment, while the other thought it was all for naught. This is confirmed by the findings of Matthews and Desjardins' (2017) research, which discovered that research participants thought they were incompatible with the commitment to be

responsible as parents and had features inside themselves that were diametrically opposed to those that parents should have.

The four participants demonstrated their dedication to forgo having children by utilizing contraception to keep their wives from becoming pregnant. This statement is consistent with Peterson and Engwall's (2013) research, which found that contraception must be a part of everyday life if someone intends to be child-free in heterosexual couples.

In fact, the three of them (D.Z., A.P., and Y.O.) are already planning biological sterilization. Unlike Y.O., who is still waiting for the doctor's approval to perform sterilization, D.Z. is still waiting for free time to act, while A.P. says that he is only thinking along such lines. So, if prior study (Lee & Zvonkovic, 2014) is correct, A.P. is still in the acceptance stage of the childfree decision-making process.

Sterilization, according to Lee and Zvonkovic (2014), is the final stage in the childfree decision-making process, meaning the act of closing the door on the prospect of having children. Only one participant (A.M.) has ruled out this option through medical therapy. Moreover, Y.O. declared openly that both he and his wife agreed to undergo an abortion if they had children while waiting for the infertile time.

Finally, the findings of this study are consistent with those of Park and College's (2005) study, which explained that the desire not to have children is influenced by individual characteristics that tend to require a peaceful home environment. The four participants said that they did not despise children and frequently played with them, especially those who were blood relatives. "I like children," Y.O. says, "but it has to be other people's children."

According to Herbert Blumer's theory of symbolic interactionism in Griffin et al. (2019), there are three principles of symbolic communication theory. The first is that people act based on the meaning they assign to the thing in question. The presence of children in marriage was deemed unnecessary by the partners in this situation. As a result, they took action by deciding not to have children in their marriage. This meaning develops through social interaction or is passed down through culture. Participants see children in this way as a result of their exposure to their surroundings, such as family and friendship circles.

Second, meaning emerges from social interaction rather than from things, and humans actively participate in social processes by interpreting symbols in situational circumstances. Finally, the cognitive process of the individual influences his interpretation of the sign. Before reaching a conclusion, the four participants continued to think about it with themselves and their partners. They each make numerous interpretations based on their own interpretations, which are affected by experience, values, and other situational variables.

Conclusions

Based on the research findings, the researcher can conclude that, despite a rise, the childfree phenomenon still has a negative connotation in Indonesian culture. This is due to the fact that Indonesia, which practices pronatalism, is dense with religious beliefs and patriarchal culture. The concept of pronatalism, along with the community's strong religious teachings, makes the childfree option appear to stray from the norm. The men in this study, on the other hand, had their own reasons and explanations for not having children.

The men in this study, on the other hand, had their own reasons and rationales for not wanting to have children. The decision to act is influenced by both internal (from oneself) and external (from one's family and environment) factors. This is consistent with Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism theory, according to which participants have a distinctive meaning about childfree decisions in the midst of a pronatalist society and social construction in Indonesia.

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