

The Inner War in Childless Decision Making: A Phenomenological Study of Women with Families

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to determine the description of the inner war of women who decide to live a family life without children (childfree). The research approach used a descriptive qualitative phenomenological design. This study was conducted in Indonesia using one subject. The participant is SN, a woman who has been married for 7 years and decided to be childfree. Data was obtained from the interview process with the subject SN. The data analysis used in this research is thematic data analysis technique. The results showed that the childfree decision taken was not only motivated by one event, but there were many factors that influenced it. From the response of the immediate environment, there is concern for the child's future, interpretation of a difficult past, and strengthening knowledge from reading books and watching movies. From the decision taken, there are also consequences that must be faced by the subject, including concerns about rejection from the partner's family and negative stigma from the surrounding environment.

Keywords– Childlessness, Married Women, Phenomenology

INTRODUCTION

Humans have the ability to think, feel, and understand the world around them rationally. This ability allows humans to process information, make decisions and develop knowledge. Humans have a reproductive system that allows them to reproduce and continue generations. The human reproductive system involves the differences between males and females, including reproductive organs such as ovaries, testes, uterus and penis. It is important to remember that while humans are biological beings, they also have complex social, psychological and spiritual dimensions. A holistic approach is required to fully understand human nature.

One of the most talked-about phenomena coming out of the western world lately is childfree. Childfree is the decision of a married person not to have children with several factors that become the reason. Among the reasons are worry because of financial inadequacy, worry about the lack of insight to build a family and bear the responsibility of being a good parent. One example of the Childfree phenomenon conducted by Ibbetson (2019) surveyed 51% of respondents in the 35-44 age group who were not yet parents stated that they never wanted to have children. (Ekelund, 2021).

In the current trend, using the term “childless” for people who choose voluntarily does not mean that people who choose to remain childless may experience negative social consequences. (Ciaccio, 2021). When childlessness is focused on understanding the impact of infertility on individuals and helping them navigate fertility treatments and the path to parenthood. More rarely, it is about voluntary child absence (Harrington, 2019). Beckman & Houser, (1982) found that whether or not childless status was voluntary had limited and insignificant effects on well-being, identifying themselves as childless by choice regardless of their situation was found to have fewer regrets and improved well-being when compared to those who did not identify this way.

These results suggest that how women see themselves and whether they accept their childless status is what actually determines how they experience this life circumstance (Stahnke, 2020). The women who are

childless for involuntary reasons are seen as warmer than women who are childless (voluntarily) and as warm as mothers, however, they invite pity from participants compared to mothers who invite admiration (Bays, 2017). These results suggest that perceptions of women differ based on the reasons for their powerlessness. Although relatively little focus has been given to childless men, some evidence suggests that these men experience negative reactions (Iverson, 2020). (Koropecykj-Cox, 2018) (Koropecykj-Cox, 2018) suggests that when a person is portrayed as childless without any reason, others tend to assume that the person will have or at least plan to have children eventually.

Based on the explanation above, this research was conducted with the aim of knowing the feelings of women who decide to live a family life without children (childfree).

METHODS

Research Design

This research uses a qualitative approach with a type of phenomenology. A qualitative approach is research that intends to understand the phenomenon of what is experienced by the research subject, for example behavior, perceptions, motivations, actions, and others thoroughly, and by means of descriptions in the form of words and language, in a special natural context. (Moleong, 1998). The reason for using a qualitative approach is because this research focuses to get an overview of the inner war of women who decide to live a family life without children (childfree). The type of research used in this research is a phenomenological approach because it aims to study the unique phenomenon that is the focus of the research. The data collection technique used in this research is an interview conducted directly with the subject.

Participants

Participant SN is a woman who has been married for seven years and decided not to have children. SN currently works as a teacher in one of the junior high schools in Malang city. She has lived in Malang since 2011, precisely when she was studying for her bachelor's degree. SN is a woman who has a hobby of reading books and watching movies. SN is the second of two children. SN's husband was her college friend during her undergraduate education.

Data Analysis

This research uses the data analysis technique of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a way of analyzing data with the aim of identifying patterns or finding themes through the data that researchers have collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Liamputtong, 2009 there are two main steps to be taken in thematic analysis. First, the researcher reads the interview transcripts and tries to give meaning to the transcribed data. (Liamputtong, 2009).

RESULTS

Events that led to the decision not to have children

Based on the results of interviews conducted with subject SN, it is known that the decision not to have children did not arise from the beginning of the marriage. At first SN still wanted to be able to have children. However, after several years of marriage, they have yet to have a child. Seeing this condition, SN then took the initiative to join a pregnancy program. From the examination during the pregnancy program, it was found that there were diseases that might hinder the pregnancy process. Knowing this, SN did not give up and continued to follow the pregnancy program set by the doctor. As time went by, SN felt tired of what she was experiencing because she had to continuously check with the doctor. In addition, SN's husband also

seemed less enthusiastic about what SN was doing. From there, the thought of deciding to live without children (childfree) began to emerge. Even if SN used to do a program to get pregnant, now SN does a program to not get pregnant by adjusting the schedule when having sex.

“After getting married, I didn’t get pregnant right away. Then I looked for ways to get pregnant by joining a pregnancy program, but my husband didn’t respond. My husband only took me to the doctor. He also didn’t want to check his sperm. I felt tired because I had to go to the doctor every month. Until finally I found out if there was a disease in my uterus. I think that’s what made me decide not to have children” (SN.1.1).

Response of immediate environment (spouse and parents)

One of the things that then becomes a challenge from the childfree decision definitely comes from the family environment, namely from the partner and parents. Because after all, the partner and parents of a woman who decides not to have children are the closest environment that might be affected by the decision. In this case, SN actually feels that her closest environment does not question the decision taken. From the husband’s side, SN’s husband does not mind when she does not have children. Because SN’s husband has the idea that having children is not easy, so everything needs preparation. SN’s husband feels that for now he is also not ready to have children because there are still many things that still need to be organized in their lives. In addition, SN’s husband is also sorry to see SN having to go back and forth to the doctor every month. SN feels that her husband actually already has the idea of not having children first, although he has never said it directly.

“For us, I think it was my husband who had the idea and then over time because I read a lot of books, then there was a documentary movie, we finally had the same idea” (SN.2.1).

“Maybe he feels sorry for me, going back and forth to the hospital almost every month. Maybe he feels that way. So maybe that’s what made him say, ‘Well, instead of you getting sick, tired of going back and forth to the hospital every month, it’s better if you don’t go to the hospital at all, maybe that’s it” (SN.2.2).

In terms of parents, SN’s parents also do not question her decision. SN’s parents give more freedom to SN and her husband to decide for themselves regarding their domestic life.

“Yes, like that, in the end, it’s okay not to have children at all. I also asked my parents, is it okay if they don’t get grandchildren from me? And they said that if that is our will and we are happy with it, then it is okay.” (SN.2.3).

“I often tell my parents that with my condition, it will be difficult for me to have children. Maybe my parents feel sorry for me, so they say it’s okay not to have grandchildren from me.” (SN.2.4).

Concerns about the child’s future

SN feels there is a worry in her when she has children. She is worried that someday she will not be able to provide what her child needs and wants. SN is also worried that she will not be able to fulfill her role as a parent optimally. Especially with SN living overseas with her husband in Malang. In addition, SN also sees the phenomenon around her that often finds children who do not get enough attention from their parents. She feels sorry for them and makes her think more and more that she does not want to do the same so there is no need to have children for now, especially with the cost of education which according to SN is getting more and more expensive.

‘Yes, that’s how I feel too, I’m only here with my husband. If, for example, we have children, who will look after our children? If we both work, we work from 7am to 3pm, after that there is no one to look after the child ... other people are not necessarily trustworthy ...’ (SN.3.1).

*'Life is not easy, especially now, let alone later.
Even if I'm still in school now, at least I have to pay 5 million' (SN.3.2)*

"I also often see children who want this and that but their parents can't give it, it's a pity, so it shouldn't be like that" (SN.3.3).

Interpretation of past experiences

SN's past experiences also strengthen her decision not to have children. Life experiences that were not easy in the past are interpreted by SN as something heavy and she does not want others to experience the same thing including children if she has them. The experience of living with a mediocre economic background made her have to experience a life that was not easy. When her friends were able to get adequate educational facilities, she did not get this because of the family's economic conditions. To be able to continue to a higher level of education, he had to rely on scholarships. In addition, to fulfill her hobby of reading books, she also could not freely buy them. These experiences also raise SN's concerns in the future when she has children.

"Because I didn't come from a rich family. I went to university on a scholarship. If I didn't get it, I probably wouldn't have gone to college. So I really feel that I have to work hard." (SN.4.1)

"I remember when I wanted to get into college, my friends took tutoring, whereas I didn't have the opportunity to do so. Another example, I have a hobby of reading books, whereas to buy a book, I have to work hard and set aside my money little by little until the book I want is bought. So, I came to the conclusion that I couldn't even make myself happy yet. Then I thought, will I be able to please my child in the future? Will I be able to give her everything she wants? Then came the thought that life is not easy. If it's like this now, how will it be in my child's time?" (SN.4.2)

Reinforcement from reading and watching movies

The experience of reading books and watching movies related to the childfree phenomenon also strengthened SN's decision. SN feels that knowledge about the childfree phenomenon and all the perspectives that arise make SN feel confident in making the decision not to have children. SN revealed that she often reads information related to childfree from social media. In addition, she also watched several documentary videos that happened to show the declining environmental conditions, the difficulty of finding work, and the increasing cost of living. This further strengthened her decision not to have children.

'Yes, there are constraints too. Then I have a hobby of watching, yes, a hobby of watching, watching some documentaries that if I have children, I will feel bad. For example, the climate is now chaotic and house prices are also now expensive. It's hard to find a job when he grows up, how can I help him until he grows up to be a person? When I thought like that, I finally gave up. Instead of adding to the burden later. That's too bad. It's better not to". (SN.5.1)

"Reading on the internet in my support there is a book that discusses childfree, so I read this book too, then on the internet there are many on Instagram, on Facebook and so on, there are so many". (SN.5.2)

Fear of rejection from the partner's family

The decision taken by SN not to have children is not without consequences. The most obvious consequence is that SN must be prepared for rejection or at least disapproval from the surrounding environment, especially from the couple's family. Especially with the background of SN's husband who is the first child, so there is great hope from her parents to have grandchildren soon. In addition, the parents of SN's husband live far from where SN lives. There was concern from SN and her husband that if she told her parents, it

would make her parents think and make her fall ill. Another concern is the fear that her decision will disappoint her partner’s family, especially her in-laws.

“My husband’s parents really hope to have grandchildren, but since they live across the ocean, I have not been able to tell my husband’s parents about our decision not to have children.” (SN.6.1).

“Yes, in the end I avoided talking about it because I was away from them. I was worried that if I talked about it, they would think about it. I was afraid they would get sick from thinking about it and I couldn’t help them because I lived far away from them.” (SN.6.2).

Negative stigma from the environment

SN’s decision not to have children has other consequences besides the fear of rejection from the partner’s family, namely negative stigma from the social environment. Because after all, the childfree phenomenon is something that is still considered taboo by most people in Indonesia, including in SN’s social environment. SN’s social environment still holds the belief that children are a gift so the decision not to have children is something that is certainly not normal. This is also experienced by SN. SN often gets questions about her condition and often leads to negative labeling of her decision. Over time, SN is now less concerned about the responses from the surrounding environment. Now she can openly convey what she decides. Not all of SN’s environment gives a negative stigma, because there are also close friends of SN who can understand what SN’s decision is.

“When I first got married, there were still many people who asked me if I had prayed yet? I said no, I haven’t prayed yet. It was so urgent, I got annoyed to the point of asking that...I asked how...it’s God who gives sustenance, don’t ask like that, don’t ask like that. That’s how it used to be, then if I’m asked like that lately, I make it clear that I don’t want to have children, why do you ask? After that, the question just stopped, no one asked when to have children anymore. But for people who are close to me, whose work environment is close to me, I have my own room and only four people. Those who asked really wanted to know. Why doesn’t SN want to have children? Well, my friend said this, actually if you think about it, we are actually selfish if we want to have children, if we have children, we hope that our children will pray for us” (SN.7.1).



Figure 1: Overview of the inner warfare of women who decide not to have children

DISCUSSION

From the results of this study, it can be described how the inner war faced by a married woman for her decision to be childfree. Where the decision does not come suddenly, but through a long inner war process. From the initial events behind the decision, the conditions that strengthen decision making, to the consequences that must be faced for the decision.

From the results of the research above, it can be seen that the event that motivated the subject to decide to be childfree was the condition of not having children after a long marriage and the health condition of the womb. However, these conditions did not necessarily make SN make the decision to be childfree. The childfree decision was taken by SN by going through various things that strengthened the decision. Among the events that strengthen SN's decision not to have children is the response from the immediate environment that supports this decision. Where SN's husband and parents support SN's decision not to have children. This strengthens SN to be more confident in her decision. In addition, SN's interpretation of her difficult past and SN's concerns about the future of children are also factors that support the decision to be childfree. Where SN's difficult past makes her worry about her readiness if she has children. SN's concerns about the future of children are also reinforced by surrounding phenomena and information related to future conditions that SN sees in films. Where SN feels that life in the future will be less easy from various aspects. For example, related to worsening air quality, increasingly difficult work, and various other aspects. This further strengthens SN's decision not to have children. All of these things are reinforced by the knowledge gained by SN from reading books and watching films about childfree.

The decision taken by SN not to have children makes her have to accept the consequences. Among the consequences that SN must accept is the emergence of concerns about rejection from the partner's family and having to face negative stigma from SN's social environment. Where SN's decision not to have children certainly raises concerns from SN herself about rejection from her partner's family. This then makes SN unwilling to convey the decision to her partner's family. In addition, SN also has to face negative stigma from the social environment around her. Where with a conservative social environment background will certainly have a negative view of SN's decision not to have children.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the research, an overview of the inner war that must be faced by married women who decide not to have children is obtained. Where the decision taken is not only motivated by one incident, but there are many things that influence. From the response of the closest environment, there is concern for the future of children, the meaning of a difficult past, as well as strengthening knowledge from reading books and watching movies. From the decision taken, there are also consequences that must be faced by the subject, including concerns about rejection from the partner's family and negative stigma from the surrounding environment.

Suggestion:

1. Future researchers can conduct similar research with other approaches and with a larger number of subjects.
2. Research can also be developed by further examining how subjects who decide not to have children face an environment with a culture that is still conservative.

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