Understanding the Issues of Co-parenting in Indonesia

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Abstract

Family plays an important role in children's growth and development. The mechanism of co-parenting is empirically proven to have an impact in marital relationship and child development. However, the number of empirical studies on co-parenting in Indonesia is still very limited. The purpose of this study is to examine the issue of co-parenting among parents in Indonesia and to understand ways to develop effective co-parenting. This study used a qualitative method approach. The data collection method used in this study is focused group discussion to 30 participants, including 15 fathers and 15 mothers. The study found that imbalances in the division of roles between partners and the difficulties in finding agreements are the biggest challenges for fathers and mothers. This study also found that there are four factors to implement an effective co-parenting, which are discussion, agreement in task division, giving appreciation, and good parenting references.

Keywords: *Co-parenting, Indonesian parenting, Childrearing agreement, Division of labor.*

Introduction

In Indonesia, the issue of parenting has been a focus of attention for the government and the society in recent years. Parents undergo various obstacles around disagreement, difficulties in regulating their children's behaviour, and lack of communication that leads to stress in parenting. Partners and families are trying to find the most effective and appropriate ways of parenting. In addition, the government realizes and emphasizes that equality in a family and balanced division of roles between

husband and wife are crucial elements in parenting. This statement was emphasized by the Chairperson of the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia (KPAI) in Indonesia), Susanto, where the absence of one of the figures, either father or mother, will greatly affect child's development (Purnamasari, 2021). The issue of parenting and the function of a family also attained special attention from the government. The government's attention to improve family resilience and welfare holistically is implemented in the BKKBN strategic plan (Renstra) 2020-2024 (BKKBN, 2020). The government has mandated BKBN to directly contribute to improve the quality and competitiveness of Human Resources, mental revolution, and cultural development.

Family plays an important role in children's growth and development (Juwariyah & Slamet, 2019; Houston, 2017; Campos-Gil et al., 2020). The role of parents is to provide supervision, direct, and equip their children to face life (Ceka & Murati, 2016; De Figueiredo & Dias, 2012). Parents' cooperation and involvement are the main keys of parenting (Kuppens & Ceulemans, 2019; Feinberg et al., 2016; Metz et al., 2018). Parents need to have effective coordination and communication to create an optimal parenting pattern for children (Cooley & Petren, 2020; Fidler & McHale, 2020). The way parents are actively involved in connecting, coordinating and collaborating with one another to carry out parenting functions is called co-parenting (Feinberg, 2002). There are four components of co-parenting, which are child-rearing agreement, division of labour, joint family management, and support/undermining (Feinberg, 2002).

A number of studies have shown that co-parenting has a positive correlation with parenting effectiveness and parenting self-efficacy, and influences parental and child adjustment (Feinberg, 2002, 2003; Merrifield & Gamble, 2013). Co-parenting has a strong relationship with the end result or the behaviour of children in the future (Murphy et al., 2016; Zemp et al., 2016). Parents' relationship and involvement in the child's early years are proven to minimize the emergence of various problems throughout the children's development (Parkes & Green, 2019). The application of effective and optimal co-parenting affects children's greater physiological and emotional self-regulation (Parkes & Green, 2019). Children's ability to regulate emotions has an impact on the child's mental health, while the lack of regulatory ability can lead to the emergence of various

problematic behaviours, such as aggressiveness, mood disorders, and the use of harmful substances (Grouzet et al., 2013; Di Maggio, et al., 2016).

Even though the co-parenting mechanism has been empirically proven to have various positive impacts on partner relationships, children's behaviour and character, people still find co-parenting to be difficult to be implemented in everyday life (Feinberg & Kan, 2008). The lack of involvement of one party in parenting affects the level of satisfaction in marriage (Kramer, et al., 2020; Kwok et al., 2013). There are various risk factors that complicates the implementation of co-parenting, which are differences between partners' characters, communication styles, and gender stereotypes (Choi et al., 2018; Russell & Russell, 1994). Parents' characteristics also play an important role in the development and implementation of co-parenting (Delvecchio et al., 2015; Feinberg, 2002). Children's characteristics and temperament become one of the challenges that causes changes in co-parenting from time to time (Laxman et al., 2013). A number of researchers found that marital quality can predict co-parenting quality as well as husband's and wife's expectations about marriage and parenthood (Curran et al., 2009; Laxman et al., 2013).

Previous studies that explore issues of co-parenting in East and Southeast Asia discussed how parenting is influenced by various cultural, religious, and spiritual histories which collectively have shaped the ethics of family unity, harmony, and identity (McHale et al., 2014; Chao & Tseng, 2019). Issues on co-parenting that occur in East and Southeast Asia are related to the lack of father's involvement in the child's development (Parke & Cookston, 2019). Similar issues also arise in co-parenting in Europe regarding father's involvement and figures in parenting (McHale, 2015).

Previous studies found that the implementation of co-parenting in Indonesia is still not as optimal (Antawati, 2020; Na'imah, 2009). Based on previous research, the mother's role is more dominant in parenting. Mothers play a major role in the children's upbringing. Fathers play a bigger role in acting as the main financial provider (Antawati, 2020).

In Indonesia, research on co-parenting is still limited so that the issues and problem of co-parenting

voiced by fathers has not emerged (Antawati et al., 2020). Thus, it is necessary to conduct empirical studies to explore issues of co-parenting from fathers and mothers and to find out things that can be done to build a more effective co-parenting. The findings of this study will provide various benefits, including providing educational information about the issues of coparenting in Indonesia and providing educational information on how to build an effective co-parenting. This research also contributes and deepens the progress and implementation of co-parenting especially in Indonesia. Therefore, we are interested in investigating the issues of co-parenting and the strategies to improve coparenting in Indonesia.

Method

This study was conducted using a qualitative method involving 30 parents who live in Surabaya and Malang, which consist of 15 fathers and 15 mothers.

Before their participation in the study, participants were given an explanation of the purpose and description of the research, as well as the procedures for data collection. They were asked to respect the privacy of other participants in the study. It was also explained to them that involvement in this research is voluntary and they have the right to withdraw at any time. After giving an explanation orally and in writing, those who were willing to become research participants filled out an informed consent stating that they understand the purpose and process of this research, are willing to participate in the study and allow the research team to publish the research results without revealing their personal identities.

The data collection mechanism of this study was focused group discussion (FGD) which was conducted via online (zoom). The focused group discussion was conducted over 4 days and was divided into 8 groups, namely 4 groups of fathers and 4 groups of mothers. The groups were determined based on the age of the parent's eldest children (toddler, elementary, junior high school, or senior high school).

Examples of questions used during the FGD process are as follows:

1. How was your experience in co-parenting with your husband/wife? What are the challenges that

you faced? What are the things that affected your coparenting with your husband/wife?

2. How did you do the division of tasks until you reach a final agreement? Can you give an example? How do you feel about your division of labour? What makes you feel that way?

3. How was your experience with your partner in terms of childrearing agreement? How did you come to an agreement in child rearing? If you have a disagreement, how did you and your partner deal with it? What do you usually do?

4. How was your experience related to your partner's support for you in your role as parents?

5. How do you deal with conflict with your partner regarding child care?

6. What are your expectations in terms of working with your partner in raising children?

The average age of the participants involved in this study was 39.73 years with the highest distribution being at the age of 31-40 years (50%). Next, followed by ages 41-50 years (37%), 20-30 years (10%), and 51-60 years (3%). The distribution of the participant's age is provided in Figure 1. Whilst the average marital age was 11.39 years. The largest participant's marriage age group is 6-10 years (30%). The second largest marriage age group is 16-20 years (27%), followed by the age group of 11-15 years old (20%), 1-5 years (17%), and 21-25 years old (6%). The distribution of the participant's marital age is provided in Figure 2.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of participants based on their employment status. Majority of participants (83%) are full-time workers. There are only 10% of participants who are not working and 7% are part-time workers. Figure 4 describes the distribution of participants living with parents/in-laws/spouses. Majority of participants (77%) did not live with their parents or in-laws, only lived with their spouse and children. Figure 5 explains the gender of the participants involved in this study. The number of male and female participants in this study was balanced.
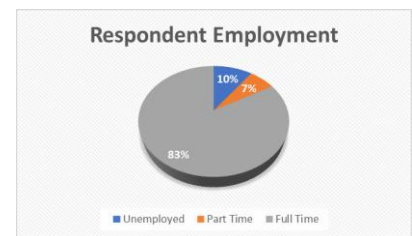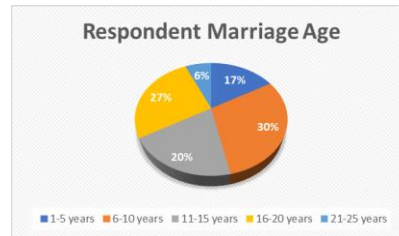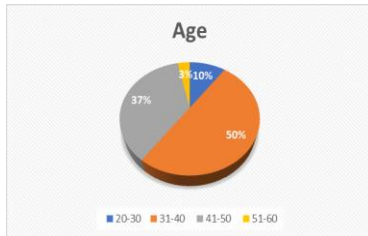
Figure 1. Respondent Age

Figure 2. Respondent Marriage Age

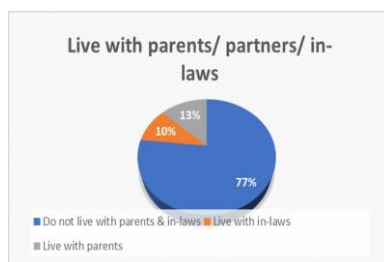Figure 3. Respondent employment status

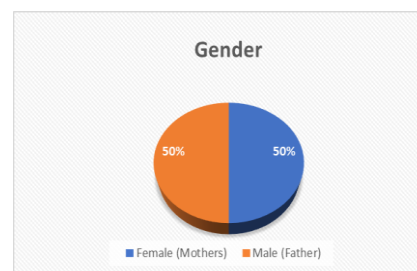Figure 4. Live with parents/ partners/ in-laws

Figure 5. Respondent Gender

The data were then analysed by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first step taken was the data cleaning process, which aims to select information that was coherent and relevant to the qualitative interview questions (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2016). Next, the qualitative information was analysed by combining three methods, which include triangulation, iteration, and theme analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). In the triangulation process, the researchers analysed the data from several sources of information. This was conducted to get a complete picture of the co-parenting experience from both fathers and mothers. Data iteration was then conducted by reflective and repeated analysis to identify similarities and differences in views, inconsistencies of information, and collective perception. From the iteration process, the researchers then analysed the dominant co-parenting themes. To avoid subjectivity in the analysis, the analysis was conducted by three different people. The findings of each analysis were discussed, and further confirmed by

the analysis team to find out issues or problems of co-parenting with parents in Indonesia and to find out how to build an effective co-parenting.

Results

The findings of the focused group discussion with 30 fathers and mothers in Surabaya and Malang (Table 1) found that an imbalance of roles and difficulties in reaching agreement in parenting were the two biggest challenges in implementing co-parenting.

Table 1

Results of the Focused Group Discussion on issues of coparenting with parents in Indonesia

Issues or Problems of Co-parenting with Parents	
Imbalance in role division:	Difficulties in reaching agreement in parenting:
a. Distrust from one party	a. Different views and ways of parenting
b. Lack of initiative	b. Lack of conflict management skills
c. Busy work of one of the parties	c. Difficulties in regulating emotions

Imbalance in role division

There were several issues pointed out during the focus group discussion as the reasons for imbalance in role division, including distrust from one party, lack of initiative, and work rush from one of the parties.

a. *Distrust from one party*

Although there was a division of roles between husband and wife, both husband and wife groups acknowledged that there was an unequal division of labour between husband and wife. It was found in this study that this situation was related to the lack of trust from wives to their husband in terms of parenting. One of the prominent things that can explain this wife's distrust was the difference in responses shown by husbands and wives to children's activities that are considered a risk. In this case the wife was too worried, while the husband was too permissive.

> "The one who is worried too much is the mother…, yes, a little too much. If it's me, it's okay, our child is a boy, right. If her mother … she's worried too much." (AAB,13).

"My wife is more protective of children. It's different for me. I loosened up more." (HASD, 132).

Some wives also distrust their husbands because their husbands do not take care of the schedule of children.

"So everything has to be reminded, it's like he doesn't want to know the schedule of the children. He always needs to be reminded. Time to eat, time to take a shower, or something like that. He always needs to be reminded." (NIB, 84).

b. *Lack of initiative*

Even though there have been efforts to divide the tasks between husband and wife, the responsibility of caring for children was still mostly carried out by the wife. According to the wives, one of the problems in task division is a lack of initiative from the husband to help their wives.

"Sometimes what irritates me is that he doesn't do it right away, but later on, ma'am. Now, when it comes to assignments for the children, my husband prefers to invite my children to play. It's more of a [playing] activity like that, but if it's like feeding, uh, bathing, I usually handle it, ma'am." (AIB, 212)

"For example, if my wife was tired, I could help wash clothes... yes, I used to schedule it. There is a schedule between my wife and me, so Monday is her time to wash clothes and Wednesday it was my turn. .. But day by day it is my wife who takes more and more roles" (AAB, 150)

c. *Busy work of one of the parties*

The dominant factor that was found to hinder the efforts of husband and wife to be able to help each other in parenting was because the husband was busy at work, making the division of care tasks often unbalanced.

"The problem is, my husband is a long distance away, so all things will go to me … So everything from head to toe, everything is back to me again. He only wants everything done." (HISMP, 271-273).

"My husband is often out of town, as he is a trainer … he meets our child only Friday to Monday

morning only. Rest of the days he is out of town." (RPISD, 91)

Difficulties in reaching agreement in parenting

a.*Different views and ways of parenting*

Although husband and wife try to be open with each other in parenting (including about the division of tasks and adjustments in the way of educating according to the child's age), sometimes there are differences of opinion and differences of opinion regarding parenting patterns.

> *"For me, it's okay if the price is cheap, the important thing is that the quality is still quite good. But my wife did not agree, so my wife asked for a more expensive one. …" (AAB,207).*

b. *Lack of conflict management skills*

A lack of conflict management skills was also hindering parents in reaching agreement in parenting, because they have different views and ways of parenting.

> *"In my opinion, conflict management is the most difficult thing." (MAB, 320).*

c. *Difficulties in regulating emotions*

Results also showed that the difficulties in reaching agreements in parenting is further escalated by a wife's difficulty in regulating emotions when a conflict occurs. Wives complained more about having difficulty in managing emotions when communicating with their husbands, so that instead of solving problems, the discussion process often triggers conflict.

The wife group admitted that regulating emotions is quite a challenge when faced with conflict. The wife described her husband as a person who is more patient and can mediate when conflicts occured with children.

> *"I've talked about it, I'm also like that. Sometimes I get emotional when I cry, I also complain, but my husband is more silent. We really need the right time when we are in a good mood, so we don't get emotional and don't get angry, that's what I usually end up discussing. Even*

when I'm having a discussion and getting emotional, I can cry… " (AIB, 363)

My husband is reluctant to talk to me. It's because my intonation has already gone high. So, my emotion has gone high, so my husband is reluctant, it sometimes hinders [the discussion]. (RIB, 110)

"It's the same. … the problem, maybe the mood, … the mood. I mean, sometimes, suddenly the mood isn't good. (Y1AB, 65).

Co-parenting Development Strategy

The FGD found several important aspects to build co-parenting. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

The Results of Focused Group Discussion Related to Co-Parenting Development Strategy

Co-parenting development strategy:
a. Discussion as an effort to reach an agreement and resolve problems.
b. The division of tasks in technical and emotional ways.
c. Giving appreciation between partners.

The results of FGD found three ways to implement an effective co-parenting, especially in Indonesia, which are discussed as an effective communication strategy, agreement in the division of tasks not only in technical aspects but also emotionally, giving appreciation to partners, and good parenting references.

a. Discussion as an effort to reach an agreement and resolve problems.

The wives indicated that the discussion with the partner was used to make decisions related to the interests of the child. In addition, it is also used as a method to resolve husband-wife conflicts.

In practice, these discussions are not held in front of the children, because the wives believe that the discussion of conflict resolution conducted in front of the children will have a bad impact and can cause trauma to the children.

> *"We've been talking from the start, we have to be together, I'm tired, he's tired, so this must be communicated, someone really has to give in. Must be in a position of mutual support." (AAB, 53)*

> *"My husband and I give each other opinions. You are like this, I am like this. So we can meet in the middle (find a solution for the problem)" (AISMP, 350)*

b. *The division of tasks in technical and emotional ways*

The division of tasks is not only related to household technicalities, but also the emotional division of tasks. Most wives reported that their husbands are more patient, so it is the husbands' duty to compensate when their wives have difficulty regulating their emotions.

> *"… when I can handle it, I will handle it. When my husband can handle it, he will handle it. ... So let's work together... so you have to be able to understand who can help and have time, help immediately... doesn't have to be, "you have to do this,"... must be able to move and help quickly.." (DISMA, 210)*

> *"For example, a child has a problem but just keeps quiet and doesn't want to talk. Finally, I asked my husband for help as an intermediary to ask the child. I am very confused when (children) put on a face that is not smiling and not friendly, silent and does not want to talk. Finally, I gave it to my husband." (AISMA, 109).*

c. *Giving appreciation between partners*

There are times when parents feel like they have failed or are unable to carry out their role as parents. In such a situation, appreciation and acknowledgment from the partner that he or she is a good parent is very valuable. Giving this appreciation is felt to be valuable, even more so in front of the children.

> *"I sometimes feel like I'm failing … That's what I said, "I may not be a good mother, ... I'm not a good parent, right?" I feel like a failure, I feel like a failure. My husband said "No, you are a good mother," (SISMA, 283).*

Discussion

Imbalance in division of roles

Both the father's group and the mother's group acknowledge that there was an imbalance in the division of roles or duties between father and mother. There are three main factors that can cause an imbalance in division of roles of participation. First, distrust from one of the parties in parenting techniques. The results of FGD found that the mother's feeling of distrust towards the father to take care of their child occurred because fathers often have different views and responses when raising their children. Mothers often consider fathers to be too permissive in raising children, so that their children are taking risky actions according to the mother's consideration. This issue raises a sense of concern for the mother about the father's ability to raise their child. The feelings of worry and a less positive view of the mother's way of parenting ultimately make fathers allow the mother to take care of their children.

The mothers' distrust of the father and the mother's assumption that father is less reliable are related to the undermining concept, which is one of the less positive components of co-parenting proposed by Feinberg (2002).

Other factors that cause an imbalance in the division of parenting roles are the fact that fathers are too busy at work and father's lack of initiative to support the mothers. The result of FGD shows that fathers' business or work took up a lot of time, so that the fathers are not able to contribute much to parenting. Therefore, even though there have been efforts to divide the tasks between father and mother, most of the proportion of parenting responsibilities is carried out by the mothers. Another thing that emerged within the mother's group was the father's lack of initiative in helping their partner because fathers are too busy with their work. The imbalance of role division and the lack of initiative between the partners does not only occur in Indonesia; in fact, several countries, such as Japan, North America and Northern Europe encounter similar issues (Fuwa & Tsutsui, 2010). The concept of fair division of role is influenced by the social context within the country or place of residence. In some countries, such as Japan, mothers are considered to hold great duties and authority in carrying out their duties and responsibilities as a wife, thus spending more time caring

for their children (Fuwa & Tsutsui, 2010). A different point of view occurs in countries that view the importance of fair role division of parenting (Greenstein, 2009). The lack of initiative causes an imbalance in role between the partners; thus, the couple experiences dissatisfaction and brings various negative impacts on the growth and development of their children (Greenstein, 2009).

The traditional view of the role of father and mother leads to a tendency for fathers to contribute less to parenting. Thus, it hinders the implementation of co-parenting. The traditional view believes that men are masculine, strong, and responsible to work (Olson, Olson-Sigg, & Larson, 2008). While women are seen as feminine, gentle, and loving figures, thus wives are considered to be more suitable in raising children and taking care of household responsibilities (Olson, Olson-Sigg, & Larson, 2008). Due to this matter, even when there are efforts to divide tasks between fathers and mothers, the proportion of caregiving responsibilities is still mostly carried out by mothers.

Difficulties in reaching agreement in parenting

The second co-parenting challenge faced by parents in Indonesia is to reach an agreement on parenting. The result of this study found three factors that create difficulties for mothers and fathers to reach an agreement on parenting. First, differences in point of view and ways of parenting. There are several things that hinders mothers and fathers from reaching an agreement. One of the most dominant factors is the different perspectives on how to educate children between parents and their spouse and/or their in-laws. This factor is more likely to happen when the family lives together with their in-laws, making the couple feel that they have less authority in making caregiving decisions due to the strong power of the in-laws. The different views on ways to discipline their children is a prominent concern. The father depicts himself in a more permissive figure position, while the mother tends to be described as an overprotective figure. Generally, in the father's domain, there is a narrative that mothers are often considered to be more assertive and too worried when responding to their children's activities/ behaviours, especially activities that are considered risky. Meanwhile, the father feels that the mother is too permissive or indulgent. This difference in point of view is often related to the father's and mother's perception about rules that are allowed or not allowed for their children.

Second, the ability to manage conflict between father and mother also plays an important role in creating discussion that leads to an agreement. The first component from co-parenting is the degree to which parents agree on various topics related to their child, including moral values, behavioural expectations and discipline, children's emotional needs, education standard and priorities, and security. Given that parent's attitudes are partly based on their own family of origin, it is not a surprise that reaching an agreement on childcare is often difficult (Feinberg, 2002). An assertive and optimal conflict management skills are required to form a good conflict resolution skill. Previous studies found that happily married couples tend to have strong problem-solving skills, by continuing to discuss and trying to understand each other (Olson, Olson-Sigg, A., & Larson, 2008).

Third, difficulties in regulating emotion. One thing that emerges within the FGD as one of the causes of the issues in reaching an agreement in parenting was the difficulty in regulating emotions. Discussion, which is one of the most important strategies to reach an agreement on parenting, often does not go well because mothers find it difficult to manage their emotions when discussing different ideas of parenting techniques with their husband. As a result, the discussion often triggers conflicts.

Co-parenting Development Strategy

Discussion with partners can be used as an effective strategy to communicate issues related to parenting, conflict resolution, and decision making. To have a productive discussion, the couple need to anticipate differences of their perspectives and debates that can occur during the discussion. Therefore, couples need to realise that the discussion must be solution-oriented and must prioritise empathy, compromise, and tolerance to each other.

The couple needs to anticipate the gap in the division of tasks, where more caregiving responsibilities will be handled by the wife. Therefore, it is important to agree on a clear division of tasks and the couple must consider the capacity of both parties. Division of caregiving duties is not only related to technical matters, such as daily household tasks and parenting activities, but also dividing emotional

tasks. Most mothers consider fathers to be more patient in parenting, thus they can balance the mothers' emotions when they have difficulties in regulating their emotions.

Technical and emotional division of tasks are expected to help both fathers and mothers to act as parents who care about their children and act as partners who support each other, even in unsupportive situations. This is in line with the previous study showing that the division of emotional tasks and support in parenting have an impact on stress or satisfaction in caregiving and self-efficacy in parenting (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2016). Previous study also found that when fathers fail to support their partners in managing emotions or engage in avoidance, mothers felt less satisfied with their co-parenting technique and unhappy with the support they receive from the father.

Both father and mother need to develop an awareness that their partner must be appreciated. One of the strategies to develop effective co-parenting is to give appreciation to their partner. Appreciation in front of children or direct praise to a partner that s/he is a good parent was found to be a good strategy to be implemented. Clear-expressed appreciation can make a partner feel respected, supported, and trusted. Furthermore, expressed appreciation can also reduce friction or conflict between partners. Several studies show that expressing appreciation about household chores, such as praising their spouse, being grateful, and being a listener are the strongest predictors of marital satisfaction

In addition, to develop a positive co-parenting, couples should agree on a source of references to gain knowledge and support related to their child caregiving. The references can be some learning resources and other people who are trusted by the couples, such as their parents, in-laws, and professionals.

Conclusion

This study provides an explanation and description on challenges faced by parents in implementing co-parenting, especially in Indonesia. There are two major challenges faced by parents, which are imbalance in the division of roles between fathers and mothers and difficulties in reaching

agreement in parenting. Families in Indonesia can apply four things to implement effective co-parenting skills, including discussion, agreement in the division of tasks, appreciation giving, and good parenting references. These four co-parenting strategies are important to be learnt and applied, especially for Indonesian families, to develop co-parenting skills.

Findings on issues of coparenting and strategies to develop effective co-parenting in this study provide a significant contribution to the development of psychology, especially to family psychology in Indonesian contexts. A lack of cultural diversity of participants was the limitation of the current study. Therefore the findings of this study are limited to the context of participants from Surabaya and Malang. Future studies on exploring the difficulties and issues of parenting based on the diversity of cultures in Indonesia are recommended.

Acknowledgments

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