

The Lived Experience of Involuntary Childless in Indonesia: Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract

The absence of children in marriage has some impact to the couple. Empirical studies showed a different result, one is that it brings out a positive impact, and another is say the other side. This discrepancy leads to the question of what cause that contradictive finding. This study is aimed to explore the lived experience of involuntary childless and determine the context of that experience. In order to get the whole understanding of the experience, this study is using depth interview method with a phenomenological principle. Participants of this study are 11 involuntary childless who have married for at least 3 years. Results show eight themes that describe the experience of involuntary childless, including positive and negative experience, acceptance, spousal, social and spiritual relationship, conflict and marital evaluation. The context that determines the experience is the relationship with the spouse, family, community and the spiritual matter of the couple.

Keywords: involuntary, childless, marriage.

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Introduction

After years of marriage, it is normal for expecting couple to have their own offspring (Yang & Rosenblatt, 2008; Regan, 2011). In many pronatalist countries, such as Indonesia, family and community put pressure on married couple for not having children after years of marriage and this is considered as an imperfect marriage. Unfortunately, not every long married couple is able to have their own children, despite the fact that they have already tried many alternatives to become parent. These kinds of couple are known as childless couple. Childless couple is divided into two categories. The first, voluntary childless couple who with no intention to have children even though possible. The second type is involuntary childless, known as couple with the intention to have children but incapable due to a

certain condition. This study focuses on involuntary childless couple due to a lack of studies for involuntary childless in Indonesia. Also, for the reason that involuntary childless get the worse impact from their condition compared to voluntary childless. This impact usually come along with the pressure from the community, especially in pronatalist community who encourage birth very much (Gold, 2012), so that they have negative reactions toward infertility such as lose and depression (Hadley & Hanley, 2011) lower happiness and life satisfaction (Tanaka & Johnson, 2016). According to World Health Organization, as much as 2.6 % women with the age range of 25-49 years old are unable to get pregnant or having infertility problem (Rutstein & Shah, 2004). Meanwhile, it is believed that the number of couple with infertility issue in Indonesia is around 10-15 % of the total normal population (Hidayati & Faiq, 2015).

Empirical studies have showed that the absence of children in a marriage have both positive and negative impact on the individual, spousal and marital level. In the individual level, infertility will lead to emptiness, exhaustion and frustration (Nahar & Richter, 2011); anxiety (Albayrak & Günay (2007); lower personal well-being (Inhorn & Van Balen, 2002); lower happiness and life satisfaction (Tanaka & Johnson, 2016). It is also commonly known that there was a negative stigma towards involuntary childless couple, who considered as being selfish, careless or even cold as a stone. This common sense is proved through the empirical study that found involuntary childless couple are perceived as having negative emotion and selfish (Koropecjy-Cox et al, 2015); and considered as a bad luck (Nahar & Richter, 2011). Despite the negative impact of being childless, contradictive result shown by other studies indicates low anxiety (McLanahan & Adams, 1989); higher self-efficacy and less domestic task (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003); financial satisfaction, pleasure, closer relationship with spouse, friend and family (Hansen, 2012). In the spousal level, involuntary childless lead to high tension and a tendency to blame each other (Rutstein & Shah, 2004) so often that this condition will cause conflict that reduce the quality of the marriage. In the end, involuntary childless couple who not so harmonious will consider divorce as a way out to overcome the feeling of guilty and failed, even though the harmonious one will choose to support each other and keep up their marriage successfully (Onat & Beji, 2012).

In addition to negative impact, some studies have found the contrasting result. Without any children to take care at the house, involuntary childless surely have less domestic task and higher self-efficacy

(Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003), closer relationship with spouse (Peters, Jackson & Rudge, 2011; Hansen, 2012), higher financial satisfaction and closer relationship with friend and family (Hansen, 2012). Further, Hansen's study also found that childless have a positive impact to individual well-being. This kind of positive impact for not having children makes involuntary childless rate their marriage life as highly qualified and their life as happy.

The discrepancy of the finding brings out the question of what the cause is. Is there any cause that allowed childless couple to perceive their marriage differently although they experienced the same phenomenon? This study assume that the differences caused by the differences of how the couple perceived their experience toward infertility so they give different meaning to their childlessness. Thus, this study would fill in the present of the gap of knowledge related to this issue. Then, the research question of this study divide into two question: 1. What is the experience of the involuntary childless? 2. How does the social context affect the experience? The purpose of this study is to understand how the lived experience of the involuntary childless and how does the social context determine that experiences. The information of the experiences provide a depth understanding about the marriage life of involuntary childless which is useful in counseling or treatment sessions. From this study we expect to have a comprehensive understanding about involuntary childless marriage life, what they really needed and how to help them having a good quality marriage in spite of the absence of children.

Method

Participants

Qualitative approach with phenomenological study is used to explore the lived experience of the involuntary childless. Phenomenological study focuses on how an individual experience and give a meaning to their experience toward a phenomenon. As many as 11 individuals (6 male, 5 female) agree to participate in this study, which eight among them were couple. The duration of marriage of the participants varied from 3 to 38 years. These participants were recruited through a snowball technique by which the first childless couple further recruits another childless couple. This study explores a wife or a husband experience as an individual, not as a couple, so the interview was done individually. For

some participants, it takes several interview to finally be able to talk about their experience, due to the sensitivity issue about infertility.

Collecting data method

During the interview process that last for about 60 – 90 minutes, each participant was asked to answer some question asked by the interviewer. The questions was about how the participant feeling, how they reacted to the childless condition, how they perceived their marriage and their relationship with spouse and significant others. Interviewer only asked participant to tell their stories related to research questions and if participants tell stories out of research questions context, interviewer have to bring back to the right direction.

Design

As a phenomenological study, the process known as epoche was conducted before the interview begin and also during the interview process. Epoche requires the interviewer to eliminate all the theory and knowledge about involuntary childless marriage so that interviewer come in to the interview process with a blank knowledge and ready to take all the participants said as a new knowledge. Additional interview was needed because some participant need more time to be able to tell the whole story of their marriage. Interview conducted in the most comfortable place according to participant's preferences. It took place either in campus, participant's and interviewer's home.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Here, researcher use the horizontalising principle, which mean that all the participant's statement relevant to topic were considered as important and need to be clearly understand (Moustakas, 1994). Researcher need to read the verbatim over and over again, so that they become familiar with the story of the participant. Reading verbatim many times will lead the researcher to the whole understanding of what was the participant experienced. Overlapping, repetitive and vague statements need to be eliminated, so researcher only needs to focus on meaningful statement. Coding was needed to identify emergent themes from these statements. Due to the large amount of identified emergent themes, then these themes needs to be classified into superordinate themes that represent

the experience of the participant. From superordinate themes, researcher develops textural description to describe participant's experiences and then proceed to structural description to explain the context or setting that affected participant's experiences. Finally, from these two descriptions, researcher synthesize into the essence of the experiences to explain the meaning of the participant's experience.

Result

Participants of this study have a demographic variation include the ethnic group, education, occupation and also the duration of the marriage that enable the researcher to identify some aspect of the experience that stable and some aspect of the experience that change over time due to demographic differences Langdrige (2007). The age of the participant varied from 25 to 76 years old, with the duration of marriage range from 3 to 38 years. The variation of the ethnic group consists of three ethnic group, Javanese, Sundanese and Minang that represent largest ethnic group in Indonesia. Education level of the participant varied from high school to doctoral degree. Participant's occupation mostly is employee for the male gender, two female participants are unemployee, and two elderly participants have already retired. All the participants are involuntary childless couple, that wants to have children right after they get married, and all of them report that they have joined fertility treatment since the early years of marriage, either medical or non-medical treatment.

Themes

After determine emergent themes from the participant's statement and then categorized into superordinate themes, eight themes derived from the participant's experience.

Positive experience

Positive experience related to more time and freedom to do pleasant activities that make the participants happy, such as watching movie or exploring new places. They love the fact that they could easily go to places they want only with their spouse anytime without worrying about children, as expressed in these responses (**All is not a real name**):

We freely go to new places, exploring the other side of this world....and that what make us fun and happy.. (Dice).

One advantage is that we could do some adventures, while most parents are not able to do it. Recently we both like to go to the isolated islands, diving, snorkeling and other beach activities (Mey).

Involuntary childless also have positive experience in terms of togetherness. Togetherness could refer to two different conditions. First, the feeling of joy when do such an activities together with the spouse (cooking, exercise, doing domestic task, or even just talking). Second, the existence of the 'us' feeling that make the spouse consider themselves as a one united. This kind of 'us' feeling enables the couple to have tighter bond and closer relationship that help them to have better coping strategies to overcome the absence of children. The "us" feeling also make the couple stronger to cope with all the pressure come from their relatives, friend or community. In other word, no matter what people said, the couple evaluates their marriage as a good and happy one. Some responses:

Without any children to take care, we could have a relaxing and fun Sunday morning. Usually we just sleep all day, resting or just have intimate conversation with my husband. Sometimes we go out to the cinema. It's really fun...no stress about kids (Nenti).

I want to support my wife by accompanying her to go to the doctor. I want her to know that this is our problem, so we must stay together to cope with it. Nobody was being left in this condition (Yudi).

The most obvious positive experience related to financial advantage that enable couple to spend more money for their own needs instead of fulfill the children's need. Some of the participant compare themselves with parents around them, and finally realized how lucky they are for not having a problem with financial obligation for children. Involuntary childless couple also has more opportunity to save or invest their money as their financial advantage, as stated by participants:

Obviously, we could save more money. If we have kid at home, we must spend more money to fulfill their need. Maybe this is how God tell us to settle our financial first before finally we have our own children (Ron).

We have house and thanks to God, my wife has some jewellery because she able to save money (Kris).

Negative experience

All the participants experience the negative impact of being childless. Negative experience related to individual negative emotion due to childless condition, such as sad, disappointed, and anxiety that affect the general affection of involuntary childless. It also affects the relationship with the spouse because of skepticism about the future. Involuntary childless worry about their future, in term that they do not have any children as their offspring and heirs. In that condition, they often feel doubt whether their marriage will last or not, whether their spouse will be able to accept the condition or not and many more uncertain thought that come in to their mind. Some responses:

Yes I was disappointed in the early years of marriage...feel so sad, and afraid that my husband will find another woman to marry (Tumi).

I was worried about our heir, who is going to inherit our money or house? (Mey).

Another negative emotion related to the reaction of others that often hurt their feeling for asking about children, or negatively stigmatized the couple for not having children. Participants think that other people do not understand and treat them unfair with their judgment. Here two examples of participants' responses:

People often ask me about pregnancy and children, and that stress me out...I never want to be in this condition. This is not what I want for sure (Diah)

It was bother me...how people judging me. They did not understand and even did not want to know what I have done (Mey).

Acceptance

In the early years of marriage, involuntary childless couple has difficulty to accept their condition due to high pressure for having children as they live in pronatalist community. But after several years, they gradually learn to accept it, as expressed in these statements:

After 7 years of trying to have children, I can accept this condition. No more tears, and nothing to lose for me (Mey).

Now I can take it easy...no hard feeling when people keep asking me about children, even I can make fun of it (Nenti).

The acceptance of the childless condition affected by the agreement of the couple about being childless. The more the couple disagrees, the harder to accept the condition. On the other hand, couple who feel all right with the childless condition do not disappointed or blame their spouse for that condition. This will help the couple to cope with all the pressure and make the marriage bonding even stronger. Responses that described the couple's agreement are:

We both have decided that it is fine to have no children in our marriage...we both accept it (Dice).

We agreed that we have tried all we can, but if God does not give us children, we accept it and still gratitude with our life (Jon)

Spousal relationship

Without any children to take care of, involuntary childless have more opportunity to spend time together so they have closer and tighter relationship. While another parent couple has responsibility to take care their children, involuntary childless have an advantage for the freedom to do pleasure activities to get closer to their spouse. Some responses:

We always want to be together...in every time and moment I always try to be able to accompany my husband (Mey).

The most important thing for me now is be together with my spouse, I do not care with others (Nenti).

The absence of children enable the couple to put more attention, give more support and doing some goodness for their spouse (helping with domestic task, giving present). This kind of caring and attention

make the couple perceived their spouse in more positive ways, and this lead to more satisfying marriage. Finally, the couple evaluates their marriage as having high quality.

We always care about each other...even I can sacrifice all I have just to make my husband happy (Mey).

We help each other with our domestic task. I realize that my wife job is hard, so I intended to help her. Sometimes I wash the clothes or clean the house (Ron).

Spiritual relationship

One of the most unique characteristic of the involuntary childless is their strong believe in God's will. Generally, involuntary childless develop an understanding that everything happen in God's plan, so they only live in and put their trust in God. They do not feel disappointed because they believe that this is the best for them and if they insist to have children, then bad luck will happen. If God want them to have children, then they will have children someday. This spiritual believe enable involuntary childless to accept their condition easier and live life happily. Believing in God's will also make the involuntary childless keep their effort to have children through all procedure, including medical or non-medical ways. Some responses:

This is all God's will, we only have to live with it. If God does not give us children, then it will be okay for us (Jon).

I believe this is the best for us, maybe God has a better plan for us (Kris).

Now we just keep try and believe that someday our dream will come true (Ron).

Social relationship

How involuntary childless couple accept their condition also affected by the social environment, including extended family, friends and neighborhood. Having children is something positively valued in pronatalist society, so involuntary childless couple of course being demanded by their family to have children. But after some time, their family seems to already accept this condition. The cool reaction from extended family provide an important support so that involuntary childless enable to live their life

happily. Calm reaction showed by the family including not asking about having children all the time, promote the importance of marriage values, and put the couple's happiness beyond the existence of children. Participant admitted that this support from their family was the most important they needed, and as long as they have it, then the negative reaction from others becomes meaningless.

My family never ask me about children anymore...that is very relieving for me. In the early years, they once ask me, but now they are seem to already accept it (Dice)

My family only gives me some information about program that might help us to have children, but never urge me to do so (Budi).

Negative reaction usually come from the outsider that not so close to the couple such as common friend or neighborhood. The more the duration of the marriage, this kind of negative reaction becomes less important. This expressed from this responses:

When met an old friend and being asked about children...that was kind of stressfull situation for me. That made me sad (Budi).

My friend asked about children, but only in the early years. Now they do not ask anymore. Only someone who does not know me ask about children. But it does not bother me anymore (Nenti)

Conflict

The result finding about the marital conflict of involuntary childless seems to be contradictive to our previous thought that the absence of children will lead to continuously conflict. Surprisingly, many of involuntary childless couple report that they have minimum conflict along with the marriage. Conflict do happen, but not so often and usually it triggered by miscommunication between couple, not by children-related issue. Instead, some couple admitted that the absence of children really help them to overcome the conflict sooner. Because they live in the house only with the spouse, being in a conflict really made them discomfort and finally try to make a peace as soon as possible. Some responses indicate the conflict and how it solved:

I never blame my wife for not having children; I know it will hurt her so much. Of course sometimes we argue or angry, but never caused by the absence of children. Usually caused by lack of communication between us (Yudi)

There are only me and my husband in the house...so if we fight, it will not take a long time. Because we need to talk to people, and we could not stand any longer to keep silent to each other (Diah)

Marital evaluation

Both positive and negative emotion experience by involuntary childless determine how they evaluate their marriage. Contrary to our previous common thought, involuntary childless couple gives positive evaluation to their quality of marriage despite of the absence of children. They consider their marriage as being happy, satisfying and fulfilled their needed as well. This also means that involuntary childless perceive their spouse as a good partner and do not have any thought to ended the marriage. When asked about their spouse, some couple believes that their couple was the best one and never wants to replace them with somebody else. Even though their spouses have some negative behavior, but after all, the evaluation of the spouse is generally positive, lead to the positive evaluation of the marriage quality. Even when they have a change to reborn, they still choose their spouse to marry with. Some responses to express this result:

I am thankful to God for this wonderful spouse...he is the best husband. If I married anyone else, I think it will not tell the same story (Dice)

Never cross in my mind to divorce with my wife just because we do not have children. The most important thing is I am happy with her and I do not want to be anyone else (Kris)

Discussion

Involuntary childless couple has varied experience, including positive and negative experience as a result of the absence of children. Thus we could not say whether the absence of children was make the couple happy or unhappy. They experience both. Positive experience related to the fact that without children to take care, involuntary childless have more time to be with their spouse and more freedom to do activities that most parents are unable to do so. Previous empirical studies have shown similar

result that involuntary childless have less domestic task so they have more time for themselves (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003) and this lead to closer relationship with their spouse (Peters et al, 2011). Financially, involuntary childless couple has no responsibility to fulfill children's need, so they could save more money and use it to fulfill their own need so they have more financial satisfaction. This result have similarity with study by Hansen (2012) indicated that involuntary childless couple have more pleasure and more satisfied with their financial condition. Undoubtedly, involuntary childless couple has more time and freedom to do what they want and what they like, and it lead to their happiness level increasing. This might be explain why some studies found that the absence of children somehow lead to positive quality of life of the involuntary childless (Hansen, 2012; Ferland & Caron, 2013; Luke & Loke, 2015)

On the other hand, as previous study have shown (Van Rooij, 2009; Hadley & Hanley, 2011; Ferland & Caron, 2013), participants in this study also experience negative things such as sad feeling, disappointed, failed, guilty and in some cases, lack of self-confidence due to their inability to have children. Involuntary childless couple live in pronatalist country got the worse impact as shown in many studies (Gold, 2012; Tanaka & Johnson, 2016). Furthermore, living in the pronatalist country make the participants also experience some negative reaction, such as high pressure to immediately have children right after they get married. Involuntary childless also get negative stigma from the environment because of the absence of children. These negative stigmas related to an infertility judgement or a negative stereotype such as selfish or not try hard enough to have children. This kind of negative reaction comes from the extended family, friends or neighborhood. Involuntary childless couple needs to deal with such a pressure therefore they need to make an adjustment to the condition. If the couple is successfully adjusted, they will support each other and will make it easy for them to accept their condition. In order to fully accept their condition, involuntary childless try to cool down and even ignore negative comment from others.

As involuntary childless start to ignore negative comment from others, they develop the acceptance process, along with the positive experience as consequences of the childless condition. Without any children to take care, involuntary childless couple free to do some pleasure activities those parents is unable to do so. As they have more time to spend with their spouse, involuntary childless got the

chance to build closer relationship and strengthen their marriage (Peters et al, 2011; Hansen, 2012). Financially, involuntary childless also have advantage because they do not have any responsibility to finance any children so they can save money for other necessity. It seems that involuntary childless couple now focuses on their own well-being rather than what others said about their childless marriage. In other words, involuntary childless emphasize the positive experience rather than the negative experience. This make the couple successfully adjusts and then accept their childless condition.

Another significant factor for this acceptance is the spousal relationship. Positive relationship leads to the couple to share responsibility to this condition, and not blaming their spouse for not having children. As consequences, couple tries to always be together when it comes to the effort for having children. Couple tries to discuss and decide the best program for them. This kind of interaction will lead to closer relationship and positive evaluation about their spouse. Couple will evaluate their spouse as kind, care and supportive. Previous study by Dew and Wilcox (2012) stated that husband's support, physically or emotionally, make the couple more compatible. At the end, compatible couple evaluates their marriage as having higher quality.

As part of collective society, social context plays an important role to affect the acceptance of involuntary childless in Indonesia. The influence of collective culture in Indonesia could be seen in the social and spiritual relationship of the involuntary childless. All the couples in this study were expected to have children by their family and it showed in how family asking about children in the early years of marriage and giving suggestion to the couple to do some treatment. This indicates the value of pro natalist in Indonesia (Hidayati & Faiq, 2015; Margolis & Myrskylä, 2011). Even though the extended family still asks about children, but it's not so demanding anymore. More family accepts a marriage without children as long as the couple happy with their marriage. They also more open with the alternative to adoption, especially adoption from their relatives as they understand that adoption could have a positive impact. Empirical study have showed that adoption have improved involuntary childless men's quality of life (Bhaskar, Hoksbergena, Baara, Tipandjanb & Laaka, 2014). This kind of openness from the extended family is one of the important support for involuntary childless to finally accept

their condition. This data bring out the next question whether there is a change in how Indonesian people perceived the value of children and marriage? It will be an interesting topic for being studied.

One of the indigenous experiences found in this study was spiritual relationship. As we know, Indonesian people known as religious and have a strong believe in God power. This believes was seen in the participant's responses to their condition. The entire participant believes that what happened to them was God's plan and they take it as their faith. This strong faith lead to acceptance that this is what best for them and they develop another faith that if they have children, something bad will happen. They keep believe that this is just a matter of time, that this time is not the right time to have children, and still believing that someday their dream comes true. Strong spiritual relationship also make involuntary childless grateful for what they have and improve their level of happiness. This result have similarity with previous study showed that showed positive correlation between religiosity and happiness (Childs, 2010; Lun & Bond, 2013).

Involuntary childless acceptances for their condition determine how conflict was managed. Just like another couple, involuntary couple also experience conflict during their marriage life. But fortunately, it was never be a serious problem and never has serious impact for the marriage persistence, considering previous study that indicate conflict could have severe impact to marriage (Gager & Sanchez, 2003). Involuntary childless usually only live with their spouse in the house so when they had conflict, it did not take a long time, because their need to interact and talk to others encourage them to make peace as soon as the conflict started.

After all, all the positive experience affected how involuntary childless evaluate their spouse and their marriage as a whole. Most participants evaluate their spouse as the best one and satisfied with their relationship, so they consider their marriage as the happy one despite the absence of children. Even though the presence of children is perceived as an important thing in marriage, but it is not above of all for involuntary childless couple, because the most important thing for them is happily marriage with their spouse. Study by Carr, Freedman, Comman & Schwarz (2014) also showed that marital quality evaluation correlate with life satisfaction and pleasant experience, thus we could say that participant in this study consider their marriage as a high quality marriage. For some participant, this evaluation

expressed in the way they did not want to ended the marriage or find somebody else just to get the chance to have children.

Conclusion

This study conclude that involuntary childless in Indonesia experience dynamic process along with the duration of marriage. At the beginning, negative experience was dominated as they feel sad, disappointed or worried about the future. But gradually the couple develop acceptance as they focus on the positive experience they have such as the closer relationship with the spouse, the freedom to do many activities and the financial advantage from the absence of children. This process of acceptance was affected by the context of spousal, social and spiritual relationship. The support from the spouse, family, and friend make the involuntary childless is able to overcome the negative impact of being childless. Their belief in God's will also keep the involuntary childless to have faith and grateful with their life. All this process finally determines the positive evaluation of their marriage and considers it as being a high quality marriage.

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