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Childfree Women's Communication Experiences: A Phenomenological Study of Voluntary Childlessness by Choice

Atika Perdana Saputri¹, Asrul Nur Iman²

¹Bhayangkara Jakarta Raya University, Indonesia, atikapsaputri@gmail.com

²Bhayangkara Jakarta Raya University, Indonesia, asrul.nur.iman@dsn.ubharajaya.ac.id

Corresponding Author: asrul.nur.iman@dsn.ubharajaya.ac.id¹

Abstract : This phenomenological study investigates the lived communication experiences of women in Indonesia who are voluntarily childless by choice (childfree by choice, CFC). In a collectivistic society deeply rooted in patriarchal and pro-natalist traditions, the decision to remain childfree is often met with profound social scrutiny, pressure, and stigma. Utilizing a qualitative, interpretive research design, this study interviewed ten Indonesian women who have made this life choice, focusing on their daily communicative strategies, challenges, and meaning-making processes. The findings reveal a complex communicative landscape defined by stigma management, negotiation of familial expectations, and the construction of alternative support networks. Key communication themes include the necessity of defensive communication against intrusive public inquiries, strategic silence within the extended family context, and the dyadic communicative reinforcement of the decision with their partners. The discussion employs Erving Goffman's Stigma Theory and concepts of the Social Construction of Reality to illuminate how these women actively challenge and renegotiate the societal script of womanhood and motherhood through communication. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of voluntary childlessness in non-Western contexts, emphasizing the critical role of interpersonal and mediated communication in maintaining a non-normative life choice.

Keywords: Childfree By Choice, Communication Experience, Phenomenology, Indonesian Women, Voluntary Childlessness, Stigma Management, Social Construction, Cultural Communication.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Indonesia, as the world's largest archipelago with 17,508 islands, possesses immense cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic diversity. This rich tapestry of cultures shapes individual perspectives on various phenomena and issues. Personality, influenced by both internal factors such as abilities, perceptions, and values, and external factors like work environments and upbringing, is profoundly shaped by this cultural context (Nelson & Quick, 1997).

A significant external factor that has reshaped societal perspectives and individual personalities is globalization. This phenomenon has exposed Indonesian society to a broader world, impacting thought patterns and responses to issues. While personality is a collaboration of mental and psychological stability (Kinichi & Kreitner, 2003), globalization has also brought to the forefront the existence and contributions of women across various fields, advocating for their equal role in national development.

Despite these advancements, deeply ingrained gender stereotypes persist, often reducing women to mere objects with limited agency. The challenge in eradicating patriarchy in Indonesia lies in its pervasive nature as a long-standing cultural tradition passed down through generations (Nyoman, 2020). This perspective stigmatizes women as subordinate, weak, emotional, and illogical (Sakina, 2017). Consequently, women are often deemed unsuitable for "tough," competitive, and rational public sectors, with those pursuing careers and competing with men sometimes seen as defying their natural role. The traditional division of labor often dictates that certain jobs are exclusively for men, confining women to domestic, enclosed, and less expansive work spheres, while men typically occupy broader and more productive domains (Kasiyan, 2008). Society, influenced by these stereotypes, often views men as the protectors and elevators of women's status, with women destined to be companions for the sake of societal completeness (Spradley, 2007).

In this evolving societal landscape, the concept of individual freedom, an absolute right irrespective of social or economic status (Harrison & Boyd, 2003), has gained prominence. The phenomenon of "childfree by choice" has recently sparked public debate in Indonesia, notably after influencer Gita Savitri Devi and her husband publicly declared their decision. This choice is often perceived as taboo, with some segments of society linking it to women's biological capacity to bear children, thus framing motherhood as an obligation (Gillespie, 2003). However, the decision to be childfree by choice is multifaceted, and ultimately, all couples retain the right to decide whether or not to become parents (Blackstone, 2019). This choice can benefit both women, by allowing them control over their reproductive health, and men, by offering flexibility in allocating their resources to personal pursuits.

Historically, the childfree phenomenon gained traction in the United States in the 1930s, largely influenced by the economic crisis of the Great Depression (Webster, 1996; Faisal Irfani, 2018). Its prevalence further increased between the mid-1970s and 2000 (Frejka, 2017). The rise of feminist movements also played a crucial role, advocating not only for women's freedom but also for their reproductive health rights and bodily autonomy (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012). Contemporary reasons for choosing to be childfree include psychological, economic, and environmental concerns (Wahib, 2014). Public figures, such as Cinta Laura Kiehl, have also contributed to the discourse by expressing preferences for adoption over biological children (Sabri, 2011; Etno Widyastuti, 2022). Other factors contributing to the acceptance of childfree by choice include high education costs, anxiety about work-life balance, and environmental worries impacting child development (Koropeckyj-Cox et al., 2018). Conversely, significant rejection of the childfree choice persists in Indonesia, where the societal expectation of having children is strong, leading to stigma against those who, despite being biologically capable, choose not to (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012).

Individuals who are childfree are defined as those who do not have biological children and do not deeply desire to have children, even through adoption (Rachel Chrastil, 2019). The childfree by choice phenomenon has generated diverse communication experiences, particularly in social media. Gita Savitri Devi, a blogger and content creator who openly shares her childfree lifestyle and career as a skincare product formulator, frequently receives both positive and negative comments on her social media platforms. These comments,

ranging from supportive messages to negative inquiries such as "are you infertile?", highlight the public's varied reactions. It is important to note that infertility (medically termed infertile, Burn et al., 2005) can affect both men and women (Bennett et al., 2015; Aizid, 2010; Rahmani & Abrar, 1999:51). These communication experiences are deeply rooted in the social construction of the "ideal family" in Indonesia, which typically includes parents and children (Aulia, 2020), and the belief that having children fulfills spiritual aspirations and ensures the continuation of the species (Hapsari & Septiani, 2015). This study aims to explore these communication experiences within the context of childfree by choice in Indonesia.

Research Objectives

From the background that has been explained, the aim of this study is to describe the communication experience, both the motives, goals and reasons for women who choose to be childfree.

Conceptual Framework

Key Concept: Childfree By Choice (CFC)

Voluntary childlessness is distinct from involuntary childlessness or childlessness due to circumstance. Childfree By Choice (CFC) refers to individuals who have consciously and intentionally decided not to have children, expressing satisfaction and commitment to this choice (Stobert & Kemeny, 2003). For this study, the choice is recognized as a fundamental value and life decision that permeates all aspects of the women's identity and their communicative interactions.

Stigma Theory (Erving Goffman)

The communication challenges faced by CFC women are best understood through the lens of Stigma Theory (Goffman, 1963). Stigma is defined as a characteristic that deeply discredits an individual, reducing them from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one. In the pro-natalist Indonesian society, the absence of a desire for children can be perceived as a "spoiled identity."

- *Discreditable* vs. *Discredited*: CFC women often transition between being *discreditable* (where their choice is unknown and they employ secrecy or "passing") and *discredited* (where their choice is known, and they must employ stigma management techniques).
- *The Moral Career of the Stigmatized*: The women's communication efforts are part of their ongoing moral career, where they learn to handle the constant, expected reactions of others, managing both visible (e.g., lack of children) and invisible (e.g., their rationale) aspects of their spoiled identity.

Social Construction of Reality

The societal pressure experienced by childfree women is maintained by the Social Construction of Reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The belief that all women should desire and have children is not an objective, biological reality but a socially constructed *objective reality* that has been institutionalized and internalized through socialization.

- *Externalization and Objectivation*: The pro-natalist norm is externalized through cultural practices (e.g., weddings focused on progeny, religious advice) and objectivated into perceived facts ("A woman's purpose is to bear children").
- *Communication as Resistance*: CFC women use communication not just to navigate this reality, but to actively re-externalize and re-objectivate an alternative reality: one where womanhood is defined by personal achievement, partnership, and individual goals, independent of maternal status. Their discourse is, therefore, a subtle, daily act of social resistance.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a Qualitative Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach. IPA is particularly suited for exploring how individuals make sense of their major life experiences and personal phenomena (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The focus was on understanding the deep, contextual meaning of communication experiences, including the emotional, social, and psychological factors interwoven with their communicative acts. This design allows for a rich, in-depth exploration of a specific, sensitive issue within a confined cultural setting.

Participants and Sampling

The participants were ten Indonesian women who self-identified as voluntarily childfree by choice (CFC). The inclusion criteria were:

1. Identified as female, Indonesian citizen, and residing in Indonesia.
2. Legally married or in a long-term committed relationship.
3. Confirmed they have made a permanent and mutual decision with their partner not to have children.
4. Ages 28–45 years, ensuring they had faced sufficient societal pressure and interaction with their choice.

Purposive and Snowball Sampling

Techniques were used. Initial participants were selected based on their known CFC status, and subsequent participants were recruited through their referrals, ensuring access to individuals who are consciously reflective about their non-normative status.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Each interview lasted between 90 to 150 minutes and was conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure comfort and expressive richness.

The interview protocol was structured around three main communicative domains:

1. Dyadic Communication: Discussing the decision with the partner and maintaining mutual agreement.
2. Familial Communication: Interaction with parents, siblings, and in-laws regarding the decision and the pressures encountered.
3. Public Communication: Dealing with questions, comments, and judgments from colleagues, acquaintances, and strangers in daily life.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and checked against the audio recordings to ensure accuracy. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained by assigning pseudonyms to all participants.

Data Analysis

The data analysis followed the systematic process prescribed by Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA):

1. Reading and Re-Reading: Transcripts were read multiple times to achieve immersion in the data. Initial notes and reflective comments were made.
2. Initial Coding (Developing Emergent Themes): Relevant phrases and sentences were highlighted, and initial codes capturing the essence of the participant's experience were generated (e.g., "avoidance of family gatherings," "the standardized defense script," "feeling invisible").

3. Structuring Subordinate and Superordinate Themes: Initial codes were grouped into conceptually related clusters, forming subordinate themes. These subordinate themes were then organized under broader, higher-level superordinate themes that captured the essence of the communication experience.
4. Connecting and Abstracting Themes: A table of themes was developed, connecting the superordinate themes to the specific textual extracts from which they emerged, creating a comprehensive, organized account of the phenomenon.
5. Producing the Narrative: The final stage involved articulating the emergent themes into a coherent, interpretative narrative, supported by rich, descriptive quotations (translated into English) to illustrate the findings.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. They were guaranteed the right to withdraw at any time and assured that all data would be anonymized. Given the potentially sensitive and counter-cultural nature of the topic, particular care was taken to protect the identity and personal safety of the participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the interview transcripts revealed three overarching superordinate themes characterizing the communication experiences of childfree women in Indonesia: The Imposition of the Maternal Script, Strategic Stigma Management, and Communicative Redefinition of Self.

Superordinate Theme I: The Imposition of the Maternal Script

Participants consistently reported that their communication experiences were initiated and framed by an externally imposed narrative asserting that a woman's fundamental identity and value are realized only through motherhood. This script was transmitted through three main subordinate themes.

1. Familial Interrogation and Emotional Blackmail

The most profound communication pressure originated from immediate and extended family members, particularly parents and in-laws, who acted as the primary agents of cultural norm enforcement. Communication from this domain was often experienced as interrogative and emotionally manipulative.

"My mother-in-law never asks about my job or my life; she only asks, 'When will you give us a grandchild?' It's not a question; it's a constant pressure. I have learned that silence is often the only safe answer in her presence." – Sarah (35)

The interrogation often centered on physical and moral deficits, implying that the childfree choice was due to an inability (physical) or selfishness (moral). This constitutes a powerful emotional blackmail, leveraging filial piety and respect for elders, making direct confrontation extremely difficult within the Indonesian cultural context. Participants noted that the communication was rarely a dialogue but a monologue of expectation.

2. Public Scrutiny and the "Pity" Discourse

In public settings, especially large gatherings, weddings, or social media, the imposition of the maternal script manifested as intrusive and unsolicited advice or expressions of pity. The pity discourse—e.g., "Kasihlah, who will take care of you when you are old?"—communicatively invalidates the choice by framing it as future regret, not present happiness.

"Strangers, shop owners, taxi drivers... when they see I have been married for five years and have no children, the first comment is almost always, 'It's time to try harder.' It's invasive. It makes you feel like your uterus is public property. I have a script prepared now: 'It's a

mutual decision, thank you for your concern,' delivered with a very firm, short smile." – Rina (32)

This scrutiny is further heightened by the concept of *kekeluargaan* (familial atmosphere), where personal boundaries are traditionally porous. The women felt obligated to engage in these interactions despite the emotional cost, often leading to a sense of exhaustion and isolation.

3. Media and Popular Culture Reinforcement

The participants noted that Indonesian media and popular culture consistently reinforce the maternal script. Images of successful women invariably feature them balancing careers with motherhood, while childfree narratives are nearly absent or are portrayed negatively (e.g., as lonely, career-obsessed, or unhappy). This lack of alternative representation makes the communicative task of defending their choice harder, as they lack cultural models to draw upon (Supriyono, 2010; Suwardikun, 2000).

Superordinate Theme II: Strategic Stigma Management

In response to the imposed maternal script and the resulting social stigma, childfree women have developed complex and context-dependent communication strategies that align perfectly with Goffman's (1963) framework of stigma management. These strategies operate on a continuum from passive avoidance to active, strategic engagement.

1. Strategic Silence and Information Control

For many participants, the most effective strategy for managing familial pressure was strategic silence and careful information control. This involved withholding the "by choice" part of their childlessness from certain family members to maintain peace, a tactic related to managing the *discreditable* state.

"I let my mother think we are just 'waiting for God's will' or that maybe we have a health issue. It's easier than telling her the truth, which would start a massive, unwinnable argument. The silence protects my relationship with her, even though it's built on a small lie of omission." – Maya (38)

This silence is not passive, but a deliberate communicative choice to minimize conflict, especially in settings where cultural power dynamics (age, hierarchy) make open discourse impossible. The trade-off is the emotional burden of self-concealment.

2. The Standardized Defensive Script (SDR)

In public or semi-public interactions where the choice is revealed and questioned, the women employ a Standardized Defensive Script (SDR). This is a pre-rehearsed, concise, and often polite rebuttal designed to shut down the conversation quickly without appearing rude.

Common elements of the SDR included:

- "We are focused on our careers/financial stability." (Socially acceptable reason)
- "It is a mutual decision with my husband." (Invoking the authority of the partnership)
- "We just enjoy our freedom for now." (A polite boundary setting)

The SDR functions as a shield, attempting to re-establish the conversational boundary that the interlocutor has violated. Its strategic use demonstrates that the communication around their choice is rarely spontaneous; it is always prepared and often reactive.

3. Assertive Boundary Setting

A more aggressive form of stigma management, often used with peers or persistent interrogators, was assertive boundary setting. This involved using firm, clear language to communicate that the topic is private and non-negotiable. This strategy typically requires a higher level of confidence and is associated with women who have been childfree for a longer duration.

“After years of being polite, I finally learned to say, ‘My reproductive choices are not up for discussion, and I will not answer any more questions about it.’ It’s shocking to them, but it works. It communicates that I am serious, and my decision is final.” – Dewi (41)

This communicative assertiveness, while effective, often resulted in social friction and sometimes temporary shunning, reinforcing the high social cost of non-conformity.

Superordinate Theme III: Communicative Redefinition of Self

The communication experiences were not solely characterized by defense; they were also proactive, involving the communicative construction and reinforcement of a valued identity outside of the maternal role. This involved two main avenues: dyadic partnership communication and community building.

1. Dyadic Reinforcement and Shared Identity

Crucially, the decision to be childfree was a continuous, dyadic communicative process. Participants reported that communication with their husbands served as their most vital source of validation and strength. The partnership functioned as a communicative safe haven where the external pressure could be debriefed and mutually reinforced.

“Every time my family makes a hurtful comment, my husband and I talk about it immediately. Our communication is 100% agreement on this. He is my first line of defense. Our shared vision of the future—traveling, focusing on our careers—is what we talk about to re-validate our choice when the outside world gets too loud.” – Lia (30)

This constant, positive communicative feedback loop within the marriage is essential for neutralizing the constant stream of negative communication and validation received from the outside world. It helps to construct a shared, legitimate identity as a couple.

2. Constructing a Supportive Digital *Lebenswelt*

Since physical Indonesian society often fails to provide models or acceptance for the CFC choice, participants actively sought and engaged with digital communities (on platforms like Instagram and private WhatsApp groups) to create an alternative *Lebenswelt*—a lived world where their choice is the norm, not the exception.

In these online spaces, communication shifts dramatically:

- **Affirmation over Defense:** Communication focuses on sharing positive aspects of the childfree life (travel, career successes, financial freedom) rather than defending the choice.
- **Shared Language and Experience:** A specialized vocabulary emerges to describe their experiences, often humorously (e.g., nicknames for nosy relatives, sharing 'bingo' cards of common intrusive questions).
- **Role Modeling:** Older CFC women communicatively mentor younger members, providing scripts and encouragement for managing difficult family interactions.

The digital space acts as a vital communicative resource, enabling participants to maintain their psychological stability and self-worth by confirming that their experience is shared and valid, a phenomenon critical for individuals with stigmatized identities.

Discussion: Communication, Stigma, and Cultural Change

The findings unequivocally demonstrate that communication is the primary medium through which the stigma of being childfree is perpetuated, managed, and resisted.

The consistent imposition of the maternal script highlights the entrenched nature of pro-natalism as a fundamental, institutionalized social reality in Indonesia (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Communication acts like interrogations and the pity discourse serve to *re-establish* the perceived objectivity of the maternal role, punishing those who externalize an alternative reality.

The participants' employment of Strategic Stigma Management techniques—ranging from silence and omission to the use of the Standardized Defensive Script (SDR)—is a powerful confirmation of Goffman's Stigma Theory. The women are not merely passive recipients of judgment; they are active, skilled communicators constantly engaged in impression management to protect their self-identity and minimize social friction. The choice between strategic silence (preserving a relationship at the cost of authenticity) and assertive boundary setting (preserving authenticity at the cost of social friction) forms the core communicative dilemma for these women.

Furthermore, the research underscores the growing importance of digital communication in facilitating cultural change. By creating alternative online communities, childfree women are engaged in a process of re-socialization and sub-cultural construction, where they collectively redefine womanhood (Umroh, 2018). Their communicative acts in these online spaces—sharing successes and offering solidarity—represent a subtle yet persistent challenge to the dominant cultural narrative. The communicative validation provided by their partners (dyadic reinforcement) is equally crucial, suggesting that the most effective antidote to societal stigma is the maintenance of a strong, private, and mutually affirmed communicative reality.

The sheer volume of the women's communicative labor—the constant need to prepare, defend, explain, or omit—reveals the hidden emotional and psychological tax levied by a non-normative life choice in a high-context, collectivistic society.

CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study provides a rich, in-depth account of the lived communication experiences of childfree women in Indonesia. The findings illustrate a complex terrain of communication defined by the pervasive challenge of navigating a profoundly pro-natalist culture. Childfree women in Indonesia are constantly engaged in a meticulous process of stigma management, employing sophisticated strategies such as strategic silence, information control, and the deployment of standardized defensive scripts to mitigate external pressure, especially from their families.

The study confirms that the decision to be childfree is not merely a personal lifestyle choice but an active and continuous communicative performance of identity. Their most vital resource is the communicative strength of their dyadic relationship with their partner and the sense of belonging forged in digital communities, which collectively serve to re-validate their choice and redefine their identity outside of the maternal imperative.

Implications for Theory and Practice

Theoretical Implications: This research extends Stigma Theory into the domain of voluntary childlessness in a non-Western context, demonstrating how cultural norms (like *kekeluargaan* and patriarchy) complicate Goffman's concepts by increasing the social cost of self-disclosure and direct confrontation. It also highlights the role of communication as a mechanism for both reinforcing and resisting socially constructed realities.

Practical Implications: The findings suggest a need for communication-based interventions focused on boundary-setting skills for CFC women and, more broadly, for public education efforts to demystify the childfree choice and promote respect for diverse adult lifestyles in Indonesia.

Limitations and Future Research

This study's limitations include its small, non-random sample size, which limits generalizability, and its focus solely on the *women's* perspective. Future research should:

1. Investigate the communication experiences of the *partners* of childfree women to create a fuller dyadic perspective.
2. Employ discursive analysis to analyze the specific linguistic features and framing tactics used in media and public discourse surrounding childfree individuals.
3. Conduct quantitative research to assess the correlation between communicative defensive strategies and long-term psychological well-being among CFC adults in Indonesia.

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