

Intrapersonal Communication Driving Childfree Decisions Among Unmarried Indonesian Women

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of being childfree by choice is gaining traction in Indonesia, yet it remains a subject of significant social debate within the country's pronatalist culture. This study investigates the intrapersonal communication dynamics driving the proactive decision-making process of unmarried adult women who voluntarily choose not to have children. Adopting a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews and participant observations with five key informants and four supporting experts. The analysis is theoretically grounded in the integration of intrapersonal communication processes with the four phases of proactive decision-making: Intelligence, Design, Choice, and Implementation. The findings reveal that the decision to be childfree is fueled by a complex interplay of "because-motives," such as past exposure to dysfunctional family dynamics, and "in-order-to motives," including the pursuit of professional autonomy and emotional stability. The process initiates with the Intelligence phase, where individuals critically observe marital failures in their immediate environment. Subsequently, in the Design phase, they conceptualize alternative life trajectories that defy traditional gender roles. The Choice phase is characterized by a rational and value-based assessment of long-term financial and emotional risks versus the benefits of personal freedom. Finally, the Implementation phase manifests as a consistent integration of the childfree lifestyle into daily financial planning and social interactions. This study concludes that being childfree is not merely a rejection of parenthood but a profound exercise in self-identity and autonomy, requiring deep reflection to navigate societal expectations.

Keywords: Childfree by Choice, Intrapersonal Communication, Proactive Decision-Making, Unmarried Women, Phenomenology.

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary Indonesian social landscape, the choice to be childfree—a voluntary and conscious decision to remain without children—has shifted from a niche lifestyle to a significant demographic trend. Data from the National Socio-Economic Survey (Susenas) by BPS in 2022 reveals that the percentage of childfree women in Indonesia has consistently risen over the last four years, reaching 8.2% (approximately 71,000 women) aged 15-49. This is a notable increase from 7% in 2019 and 6.5% in 2021. This trend correlates with a decline in

Indonesia's population growth, which fell from 1.22% in 2021 to 1.13% in 2023. Recent studies suggest that birth rates may continue to drop to as low as 0.8% by 2030.

Despite its rising prevalence, the childfree lifestyle remains a subject of intense social contradiction in Indonesia's collectivist and patriarchal society. Unlike "childless" individuals who cannot have children due to health factors and are generally more accepted, . For many modern Indonesian women, this decision is often a response to economic uncertainty and the fear that having children might disrupt financial stability or career productivity. Recent literature also identifies "pull" factors, such as the desire for increased freedom, and "push" factors, such as the rejection of motherhood roles that might lead to a loss of self-identity.

Recent studies, such as Moore's (2024) exploration of relief and regret narratives, predominantly focus on the retrospective accounts of women who have already solidified their lifestyle or are navigating it within a marriage. Similarly, existing Indonesian literature often examines the dyadic negotiation between husbands and wives. This creates a critical oversight of the pre-marital phase, where the decision often originates. Rochadiat et al. (2023) emphasize that before a woman defends her choice to a partner or society, she engages in intense internal negotiation and online information seeking to validate her stance against the "motherhood mandate."

Addressing this gap, this research isolates unmarried adult women as the primary subjects, arguing that for this demographic, the decision to be childfree is a product of complex intrapersonal communication—the internal use of language and thought—rather than interpersonal consensus. To decode this internal cognitive architecture, this study adopts Herbert Simon's Theory of Decision Making, which posits that decision-making is a four-stage process: Intelligence, Design, Choice, and Implementation. While Mensah (2022) recently highlighted the relevance of Simon's model in analyzing complex social choices in the age of big data, its application to reproductive communication remains a novel theoretical venture.

Theoretical foundations from the last three years support this investigation. Rakhmat (2024) defines intrapersonal communication as the internal process of receiving, processing, and storing information, while Riadi (2023) emphasizes its role as the internal deliberation that occurs before a decision is finalized. Complementing this, Pasolong (2023) describes decision-making as a proactive problem-solving process involving the selection of alternatives. Furthermore, Annisa (2024) highlights that adult cognitive development involves more reflective and complex thinking, allowing individuals to make mature decisions that may deviate from dominant social expectations.

Understanding this phenomenon is of high urgency, as the childfree choice is not merely an individual preference but a reflection of shifting cultural constructions and ideological changes. Without deep academic inquiry and adequate public education, this trend could profoundly impact future social structures and national development. This research aims to provide a comprehensive perspective on the mental and emotional dynamics experienced by unmarried women, contributing to the broader fields of psychology of communication and sociocultural studies in Indonesia. Handayani (2021) frames the childfree phenomenon in Indonesia through the lens of women's human rights and reproductive autonomy, emphasizing the right of women to define their own life paths regardless of societal pressure.

This study distinguishes itself from contemporary research by shifting the analytical lens. Unlike Suryawan and Ardhiani (2023) who focus on the external sociological construction of womanhood, or Moore (2024) who examines post-decision emotional states, this research investigates the processes of decision formation. By applying Simon's framework, this study seeks to understand how unmarried Indonesian women scan their social environment for risks (Intelligence), internally simulate future scenarios without children (Design), rationalize their final stance against religious and cultural dogma (Choice), and prepare themselves for the

dating market (Implementation). Thus, this research provides a novel contribution by elucidating how intrapersonal communication dynamics serve as the fundamental mechanism driving childfree-by-choice decisions among unmarried women in a collectivist society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Voluntary Childlessness: Global Shifts and Local Stigmas

Voluntary childlessness, or the "childfree" phenomenon, represents a deliberate decision to forego parenthood, distinct from involuntary childlessness caused by infertility or circumstantial postponement. Recent scholarship indicates a paradigm shift in the motivations underpinning this choice. In their comprehensive review, Hintz and Brown (2023) observe that contemporary childfree motivations have moved beyond simple dislike of children; they now encompass complex macro-level concerns, including environmental degradation, political instability, and the desire for "ontological security" in an uncertain world. This shift suggests that the decision is increasingly cognitive and value-based rather than purely emotional.

However, the experience of being childfree is heavily contingent upon cultural context. While Western literature often frames this choice as an expression of neoliberal individualism, the narrative in Indonesia is fraught with religious and communal tension. Indonesia maintains a strong pronatalist ideology where womanhood is culturally synonymous with "ibuism" (motherhood). Suryawan and Ardhiani (2023) argue that in such collectivist societies, a woman's reproductive body is often viewed as community property; thus, the refusal to reproduce is perceived as a disruption of social harmony. Consequently, childfree women in Indonesia face "pronatalist microaggressions," which Utami and Hasanah (2022) describe as persistent social sanctions that negatively impact subjective well-being. This cultural friction necessitates a deeper examination of how individuals sustain such counter-cultural decisions, particularly when they lack the "marital shield" of a supportive spouse.

Agrillo and Nelini (2008) assert that the decision to be childfree is a multifaceted phenomenon rooted in an individual's desire to maintain self-autonomy, lifestyle flexibility, and career development, which often emerges as a form of negotiation against rigid sociocultural expectations.

Intrapersonal Communication as a Mechanism of Agency

While interpersonal communication (support from partners or friends) is well-documented as a buffer against stigma, the role of *intrapersonal communication* remains under-theorized in fertility studies. Intrapersonal communication refers to the internal use of language or thought, comprising self-talk, inner monologues, and the internal processing of information. For unmarried women navigating the "motherhood mandate," this internal dialogue is the primary site of resistance. Riadi (2023) highlights the role of intrapersonal communication as a vital cognitive tool for maintaining mental health while navigating heavy social pressures regarding marriage and family in Indonesia.

Rochadiat et al. (2023) suggest that before women disclose their childfree status to the public, they engage in a rigorous process of "internal negotiation." This involves interpreting societal messages, validating one's own desires, and rehearsing defenses against potential backlash. In the absence of a partner to validate their choices, unmarried women rely on this internal feedback loop to construct a resilient identity. This aligns with broader communication theories suggesting that intrapersonal communication serves as a prelude to interpersonal action; effective self-persuasion is required before one can persuade others. Therefore,

understanding the *content* and *function* of this internal dialogue is crucial to understanding how the childfree decision is solidified. Hintz and Brown (2023) examine how childfree individuals manage uncertainty and seek ontological security, positioning the decision as a proactive strategy for maintaining stability in an increasingly unpredictable world.

Theoretical Framework: Herbert Simon's Four-Stage Decision Model

To operationalize the cognitive process of choosing a childfree life, this study utilizes Herbert Simon's Theory of Decision Making. Simon challenged the concept of absolute rationality, proposing instead that individuals operate under "bounded rationality"—limited by information, time, and cognitive capacity. He conceptualized decision-making not as a single act, but as a four-stage continuum (Simon, 1960; reinforced by Mensah, 2022). This framework provides a novel lens for analyzing reproductive choices:

Intelligence Phase

The *Intelligence* phase involves scanning the environment for conditions calling for a decision. In the context of this study, this represents the moment an unmarried woman identifies the misalignment between her personal desires and societal expectations. It involves the internal recognition of the "problem" (e.g., "I do not feel the maternal instinct expected of me"). Moore (2024) notes that this phase is often triggered by observing the struggles of parenting in one's peer group, serving as data points for the internal scanner.

Design Phase

Following identification, the *Design* phase involves inventing, developing, and analyzing possible courses of action. Here, the intrapersonal dynamic shifts to "simulation." The individual mentally constructs different future scenarios—a life with children versus a life without. Hintz and Brown (2023) highlight that for modern women, this design process involves weighing competing life goals, such as career mobility or environmental ethics, against the traditional path of motherhood.

Choice Phase

The *Choice* phase is the selection of a particular alternative from those available. Simon argues that decision-makers satisfy rather than maximize. For the unmarried Indonesian woman, this means selecting the "Childfree" option not necessarily because it is perfect, but because it satisfies her criteria for well-being more effectively than the alternative, despite the social costs. This phase involves the crystallization of the decision through self-talk that rationalizes the choice against religious or cultural guilt (Suryawan & Ardhiani, 2023).

Implementation Phase

Finally, *Implementation* involves putting the decision into effect. For unmarried women, this is not a one-time event but an ongoing communicative strategy. It involves navigating the dating market (filtering potential partners who want children) and managing family expectations. Rochadiat et al. (2023) imply that successful implementation requires a strong alignment between the internal decision and external communication strategies.

By mapping the childfree decision onto these four stages, this research moves beyond descriptive phenomenology to offer a structured analysis of the *process* of reproductive decision-making.

METHOD

This study utilizes a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to examine the intrapersonal communication processes involved in the proactive childfree-by-choice decision-making of unmarried adult women in Indonesia. Data were collected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques, involving five primary informants—unmarried adult women who have committed to a childfree lifestyle—and four supporting informants, including academic experts in psychology and sociology, a partner, and a peer. Primary data collection was conducted via in-depth interviews and participant observation, supplemented by a comprehensive literature review of academic books, previous research, and digital resources. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed data triangulation, peer debriefing with colleagues, and member checking to verify that the reported information accurately reflected the informants' perspectives. Data were systematically processed using the Miles and Huberman framework, which encompasses data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. The research was localized in Bandung, Indonesia, and conducted over a six-month period from March to August 2025.

DISCUSSION

Based on the research findings, the decision-making process for remaining childfree by choice among unmarried adult women in Indonesia is not merely a rejection of social norms but a manifestation of psychological independence born from deep reflection and internal value alignment. The following sections discuss the results categorized into five core dimensions of the proactive decision-making process.

Motives: The Synthesis of Past Experiences and Future Goals

The study identifies that the motives for being childfree are multi-layered, consisting of both implicit and explicit drivers. Explicit motives are consciously articulated, centered on personal values such as freedom, career productivity, and emotional stability. Conversely, implicit motives often stem from unconscious personality traits or traumatic experiences in dysfunctional family environments. Applying the perspective of Albert Schutz, these motives are categorized into:

- "Because-motives": These reflect past experiences that form a negative perception of motherhood or a lack of trust in conventional family institutions.
- "In-order-to motives": These represent future-oriented goals, such as maintaining financial independence and achieving self-actualization without the emotional or financial burdens of child-rearing.
- Explicit and Implicit Motives: Explicitly, participants articulate a desire for freedom, self-actualization, and emotional stability. Implicitly, the decision is driven by personality tendencies such as the need for personal space and control, often rooted in past traumatic experiences or exposure to dysfunctional family environments. These implicit motives manifest as a fear of household conflict or anxiety regarding the loss of identity upon becoming a mother

Park (2005) utilizes Weber's typology of action to argue that voluntary childlessness is a 'rational-purposeful' choice, where individuals systematically weigh the perceived costs of parenthood against their personal life projects and desire for autonomy.

Intelligence: Awareness through Observation and Information

In the intelligence stage, intrapersonal communication becomes intense as women recognize the mismatch between dominant social expectations—such as the obligation to marry and reproduce—and their own personal preferences. This phase is characterized by active observation of household failures in their immediate social circles. As members of the digital generation, informants utilize extensive access to information to deepen their understanding of the childfree lifestyle. This stage functions similarly to the sensation process in intrapersonal communication, where individuals receive and filter social stimuli, such as the burden of peer pressure to marry young.

Design: Mapping Alternative Life Paths

The design phase involves conceptualizing and formulating alternative life options that deviate from the mainstream. Informants identify the "problem" as a gap between social expectations and their self-identity, leading them to question whether happiness must inherently include motherhood. This phase aligns with the perception process, where individuals interpret information based on their internal values. Informants systematically analyze sub-problems, such as their emotional capacity for parenting, concluding that following a traditional path might lead to frustration or emotional absence as a parent.

Choice: Evaluating Risks and Affirming Identity

Tantiani (2022) discusses the psychological dynamics of early adulthood in Indonesia, suggesting that the childfree decision is a result of a sophisticated maturational process and long-term risk assessment. The choice stage is marked by a strong internal affirmation that a childfree life is the most suitable path for the individual's needs and values. Unlike an impulsive reaction, this choice is reached through a mature evaluation of long-term risks, emotional efficiency, and financial impact. Informants internalize the decision as a core part of their identity, balancing rational logic with values like authenticity and responsibility. While doubts may exist, the final decision is born from the courage to confront those doubts through critical thinking and deep internal dialogue.

Implementation: Transforming Decisions into Actions

In the implementation stage, the decision transitions from internal reflection into concrete lifestyle practices. This includes:

- Practical adaptation: Informants begin allocating funds originally intended for child-rearing toward investments, self-development, or travel.
- Social adaptation: Individuals develop strategies to manage external social pressure and stigma in Indonesia's collectivist and patriarchal society.

CONCLUSION

This study elucidates that the proactive decision to adopt a *childfree by choice* lifestyle among unmarried adult women in Indonesia is a complex product of intrapersonal communication, rather than a mere rejection of social norms. The decision-making process is fundamentally a deep reflection on self-identity, life goals, and the anticipation of social consequences. The dynamics of this process are structured through four sequential phases: Intelligence, Design, Choice, and Implementation.

Firstly, the Intelligence phase involves intense observation and information gathering, where individuals identify a dissonance between their personal values and the prevailing societal expectations regarding motherhood. This leads to the Design phase, in which individuals actively formulate alternative life concepts that align with their capabilities and aspirations, bridging the gap between actual conditions and their idealized future.

Subsequently, the Choice phase represents a critical juncture where the decision is crystallized. This choice is not impulsive; rather, it is a calculated affirmation based on an assessment of emotional, physical, and financial limitations, alongside a desire for self-determination. Finally, the Implementation phase marks the transition from internal dialogue to external action, where the decision is consistently practiced through lifestyle adjustments and resilience against social pressure.

Furthermore, the study highlights that these decisions are driven by dualistic motives. "Because-motives" are predominantly rooted in past experiences, such as trauma or negative perceptions of traditional family roles. Conversely, "in-order-to motives" are oriented toward future objectives, specifically the pursuit of freedom, career productivity, emotional stability, and financial independence.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that future research expand the scope of participants to include married couples and male perspectives, as well as investigate the influence of religious values on this phenomenon. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the shifting dynamics of gender relations and family structures in Indonesia.

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