

## The Lifeworld of Voluntary Childless Married Couples

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### Abstract

*Childlessness is an increasingly common phenomenon in modern society, and couples who do not have children often face unique experiences. Despite the existing literature about being childless, a dearth of recent evidence on the lifeworld was noted. This qualitative study explored the lifeworld of ten voluntary childless married couples using transcendental phenomenology. Data were gathered through one-on-one semi-structured interviews with a researcher-made guide. Data were transcribed, coded, and categorized to obtain the results of the study. Data revealed that factors contributing to voluntary childlessness included age, body concerns, career focus, fear of responsibility, socio-economic factors, and others' experiences. Informants reported positive emotions, togetherness, financial security, career focus, firm decision-making, support systems, and social challenges in their experiences. Their future perspectives included contentment, commitment, increased time together, anxiety, and thoughts on inheritance. The study suggests a need for further research on this topic. Additionally, information and educational materials about raising awareness, finding support, and building the confidence of the voluntary childless married couples to speak up and recognize their uniqueness should be developed.*

**Keywords:** *Marriage, Childlessness, Transcendental Phenomenology, Moustakas, Philippines.*

### 1. Introduction

The phenomenon of voluntary childlessness among married couples poses intricate challenges and choices influenced by divergent perspectives on motherhood, family, careers, and the future. While opting out of having children offers freedom in time, finances, and lifestyle, it challenges traditional norms emphasizing parenthood's natural role in marriage. Couples who choose not to have children defy the conventional wisdom that children are a natural and desirable aspect of marriage. Couples may choose to stay childless for several reasons, which may be affected by various factors, including historical and societal influences (Gouni, 2022). Further, Gillespie (2003) highlights how this choice evolves amid life events, affecting societal perceptions of individuals. Shapiro

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(2014) emphasizes the importance of voluntary childlessness identity, portraying it as a committed, preferred lifestyle advocated by emerging social organizations.

Childlessness has historically been viewed as a social problem that disproportionately affects married, middle-class, white, heterosexual women and couples. There is also a significant body of literature about women who choose to remain (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017). Nevertheless, the percentage of childless men in some nations is more significant, yet research exploring these intentions in men remains scarce (Smith, 2020). A more recent Pew Research study put the frequency of child-free people at a significantly higher rate of 23% and specifically asked men and women why they were not planning to have children (Neal & Neal, 2021). This research illuminates economic factors (e.g., financial insecurity and high living costs) as major drivers for couples opting for childlessness.

Being childless is a situation that is often misinterpreted. For instance, a Bangladeshi study used the collection of life. The historical technique exposed a significant stigma that rural childless women faced (Xie et al., 2023). Similar to this, Rouchou's (2013) overview of the literature on the effects of the inability of a woman to conceive a son in emerging nations like Ghana banned her from maturing into an elder. In India, being childless can result in societal stigma, especially for those rural women without children (Childfree by Choice, 2015).

There is also a rising trend in the Philippines of adults choosing not to have children, citing financial reasons. Reports from the Philippine Statistics Authority (2005) cited in the study of Tudy & Tudy (2020) reveal varying rates of childlessness among women and married couples, indicating a growing trend of deliberate childlessness. Couples who choose not to have children may find purpose in their lives due to their experiences of being outside the norm. Existing research on childless couples who choose not to have children is obsolete and limited in depth. One of the countries with the greatest population growth worldwide is the Philippines. The quantity might soar to 142 million by 2045 (Data Authority of the Philippines, 2015) in light of the growing cultural assumption that married couples will have children. However, there is a lack of information regarding the nation's childlessness statistics.

## **2. Objectives**

This study aimed to investigate the lifeworld of voluntary childless couples.

## **3. Methodology**

This study used the transcendental phenomenological research method (Bersamina & Quero, 2023). Phenomenology is the most appropriate approach to studying the lifeworld of voluntary childless married couples since this is a philosophical approach to studying experience (Bobita & Talbo, 2023). The study included ten voluntary childless married couples from Ilocos Sur. The researchers used Moustakas (1994) to frame the questions for the interview guide. Semi-structured face-to-face or online interviews were conducted. Interviews were audio recorded with the informants' consent and later transcribed for data analysis to ensure accuracy. The researchers utilized Moustakas's (1994) framework to analyze the informants' experiences. Moustakas' data analysis approach involved bracketing epoché, then transcendental–phenomenological reduction or clustering of significant statements into three themes that include three phases; the first phase focuses on past experiences with the phenomenon of interest. Participants reconstruct their early experiences. The second phase focused on the details of the experiences. The purpose is to concentrate on the concrete details of the participant's experience with the phenomenon, and the third phase is the description of the future. Then, write a composite description that presents the phenomenon's essence using Textual

and Structural descriptions that focus on the common experiences of informants and the meaning of all the experiences.

#### 4. Results and Discussions

The study's findings revealed the manifestations of the deciding factors that influenced married couples to remain childless, their lifeworld, and how married couples view themselves in the future despite being childless. Three themes emerged as to how the couples remained childless.

##### 4.1. Causality of being a childless couple

This study explored the deciding factors that influenced couples to remain childless. Becoming voluntarily childless can be an empowering decision for a couple who feels they do not have the resources, emotional capacity, or desire to have children. It can also be a way to invest more in one's career, relationships, and other personal goals and interests.

Becoming voluntarily childless is a way to create a life that works best for each individual or couple. According to the informants who participated in the study, child-rearing is the main factor that caused couples to be voluntarily childless. Corresponding to the study of Bodin et al. (2019), parenthood is expected to mean less freedom and less time for personal interests. The relevance of other life objectives and interests, reluctance to modify one's lifestyle, and a desire for spontaneous movement are some of the most frequently cited arguments against having children. Meanwhile, the least factor cited by the informants that led them to choose not to have children was age as couples. Since it is believed that getting pregnant at an advanced age is challenging, couples depend on this factor, as informant Male 4 stated, "At our age. My wife and I are already in our 30s". Bolter (2021) explores the factors that contribute to the couple's decisions to avoid pregnancy, such as economic hardship, knowledge of family planning, and fear of famine, as Female 2 revealed, "naisip ko na kung gaano kahirap ang buhay" (she considered how difficult life is).

Furthermore, body concern was also revealed as one factor that caused couples to be voluntarily childless. The result was primarily coming from female informants where body consciousness, body insecurities, and inability to return from old shape were mentioned. As such, Whereas, Female 1 revealed that "adda buteng ko maam nga aganak lalo ta kastuy ti bagik kas makita yu met" (I am afraid to give birth especially because this is my body as you can see too). Therefore, body image concerns are a major factor in women's decision to avoid pregnancy, and providing support and understanding to women can help them cope with these concerns.

The informants also exposed that they prioritize their careers and other aspects of their lives more than caring for children; as Male 3 stated, "Honestly, we are too focused on our career." According to the study of Belogolovy, M., & Gruber, M. (2016), couples in which one partner is more career-oriented than the other may be more likely to be childfree, as the more career-oriented partner may not have the time or desire to start a family.

Additionally, most female informants revealed that their way of living is one reason that affects their decisions. Due to the challenges of living today, the informants find it difficult to meet the demands of children, as Female 5 said, "Tatta a narigat ti pinagbiag haan mi kaya biyagen nga agasawa" (raising children is difficult since they will not be able to support them considering the cost of living today). Corresponding to this is the study of Gouni et al. (2022), which shows that couples who remain childless often cite concerns about parenthood's financial and emotional burdens. Male 1: "I do not think that I am capable of being a parent, a father." Based also on the book of Gill (2017),

Childlessness in the 21st Century: The Rise of the Childfree Life. Routledge. The author examined the factors that influenced couples to remain childless, such as the current cost of living and the changing role of women in society. It also talked about the rise of child-free couples and the social and economic implications of their decisions. Being childless is a personal choice that people make, and in today's worldwide society, it is becoming a more and more realistic alternative.

Moreover, the study also found that socio-economic factors like insufficient income and inflation of goods influenced the decision of the informants to be voluntarily childless. The informants acknowledged that their salary is sufficient to cover their needs and those of their parents, particularly given the high cost of commodities. The study also found that socio-economic factors like insufficient income and inflation of goods influenced the decision of the informants to be voluntarily childless. The informants acknowledged that their salary is sufficient to cover their needs and those of their parents, particularly given the high cost of commodities.

As evidenced by the sub-theme developed from the informants' responses, the experiences of others' learning motivated them to be voluntarily childless. Female 4 stated, "Noong na-witness ko yung mga kapatid kong babae na nag-i-struggle in caring for their child" (it is when I witnessed my siblings struggle taking care of their children). The informants claimed that their perceptions of having children and their inability to handle the burden were shaped by the experiences of their siblings, friends, celebrities, and other individuals in their immediate environment. In which their partners also share in the decision. The result fits the theory that childfree individuals' observations of parenting in their social environment and experiences with parents, whether positive, negative, or ambivalent, played a role in their decision.

#### 4.2. The lifeworld of the voluntary childless married couples

This study explored the lived experiences of a voluntary childless married couple. Married couples who choose to remain voluntarily childless have their own distinctive experiences and perspectives. Including the advantages they have, the difficulties they encounter, and how these experiences have affected their relationships and way of life. Positive emotions are the most common experience cited and one of the positive outcomes of being childless.

According to the collected data from the informants, job focus is one of the positive experiences of the informants. It is one of the positive outcomes of being voluntarily childless since they can concentrate on their goals at work. According to Female 2, "We can concentrate more on our goals in life." Corresponding to this, Gedeon's study (2013) suggests that job focus can be a factor in the decision to remain child-free, as individuals may be unwilling to sacrifice their career and professional goals in favor of having children.

Furthermore, most male informants shared that they are certain about their decision to be a voluntarily childless married couple. According to Male 3, "Remember that parenting is an option and never an obligation." According to Blackstone and Stewart (2016), some couples feel so sure about remaining child-free that they do not consider parenthood an option. They suggest that this certainty is shaped by various factors, including couples' attitudes toward parenthood, the influence of societal norms, and the perceived costs and benefits of parenting.

Another most common experience cited and one of the positive outcomes of being childless is the presence of a support system. Since the informants shared the decision with other people, especially the significant ones in their lives, they made them aware of their situation, allowing them to provide practical or emotional support. For Male 5, "My nieces and nephews call me papa already." This can be supported by the study conducted by Huang and Lee (2017), where it was found that couples with higher levels of social

support had more positive attitudes toward remaining voluntarily childless. The study also found that support from family members, friends, and colleagues was important for the couples' sense of well-being.

#### 4.3. The future views of childless couples

This study examined the future views of being a voluntary childless married couple. The results that were presented in the previous pages will be discussed in this section. The findings of this study contribute to understanding the lives of voluntary childless married couples.

Voluntary childless couples face unique and complex issues in their lives, including the challenge of navigating societal expectations and the feelings of contentment that come with their chosen lifestyle. One contributing factor is contentment, the freedom to pursue their interests and passions. The informants mentioned they have more time for leisure activities and personal development than couples with children. This increased freedom to pursue their interests can lead to a sense of autonomy and self-determination; as Informant Female 2 mentioned, "We managed to be happy in the past years even if it is just the two of us." Additionally, voluntary childless couples typically have more resources, such as financial resources, time, and energy, which can lead to greater satisfaction and contentment in their lives. Findings suggest that childfree couples experienced greater satisfaction in their relationships, greater life satisfaction, and higher levels of psychological well-being than couples with children. Informant Female 1 stated, "It has been five years that we survived as a childless married couple." The study also found that childfree couples experienced greater satisfaction in their relationships due to less stress, more time for shared activities, and more meaningful conversations (Stahnke et al., 2020). Finally, the study found that couples who had already experienced parenthood and then decided to remain child-free reported feeling relieved and more satisfied with their decisions. Informant Male 1, "We are satisfied with our decision to remain childless," and Female 5, "Our decision to be childless brings relief to us," have the same thought. These findings suggest that couples who remain voluntarily childfree experience greater levels of psychological well-being than couples with children (Peterson & Engwall, 2013).

According to the article of Henderson, J. L., & Mills (2017), through multiple regression analyses, the authors found that childfree children reported higher levels of contentment than those who were not. In particular, identity, freedom, and meaningful work were related to increased contentment. Informant Male 1 also mentioned that "we have more time as a couple." The authors conclude that these findings suggest that "the childfree can live meaningful and fulfilling lives, and that contentment among the childfree is multidimensional."

On the other hand, being a childless married couple, they could feel anxious about the future at the same time. According to informant Male 1, "I am aware that I would not be able to experience having a child... I will not experience being a father". The informants who participated in this study mentioned that they never got to experience what it was like to be a parent and sometimes thought about who would care for them when they got older. This result corresponds to the study of Buonanno, M., & Adam, E. K. (2015). Their study examined how adults who have chosen to remain child-free feel about their decision. Specifically, the authors analyzed the feelings of worry that adults may experience when they are child-free. The findings of this study suggest that while some childfree adults may worry about their decisions, these feelings are not necessarily universal and can be managed with greater acceptance and understanding of the choice to remain childfree. Sung et al. (2014) examined the difficulties that voluntarily childless individuals may face in the future. The authors discussed the psychological, egalitarian gender roles about family breadwinning and social difficulties that may result from a decision not to have children. Informant Male 2 stated, "Your train of thought will

eventually be who to take over my wealth. Furthermore, Soderberg et al. (2012) found that couples who had not had children were more likely to report feelings of depression, anxiety, and sadness.

## 5. Conclusions

Married couples opt not to have children for various reasons, such as concerns about their bodies and age, a strong focus on career goals, apprehension about the responsibilities of parenthood, socio-economic considerations, and observations of others' experiences. Choosing voluntary childlessness brings them joy and unity, fostering financial stability and a concentrated focus on their careers. A supportive network bolsters their resolute decision despite the social challenges they might encounter due to their choice. Voluntarily remaining childless yields positive outcomes for these couples, including contentment, unwavering commitment, a sense of peace, and increased quality time together. Nevertheless, they also grapple with anxiety concerning their future, particularly regarding the inheritance of their hard-earned assets, as they intend to remain child-free.

The findings of this study have identified new research areas that merit further investigation. The following ideas are recommended for further investigation: Information and Education Materials about raising awareness, finding support, and building the confidence of the voluntary childless married couples to speak up and recognize their uniqueness. To future researchers: 1) Conduct research with couples of the same age cohort. Newlywed couples in their childbearing years, couples towards the end of their childbearing years, and individuals whose childbearing years were behind them may all be studied. 2) Couples who remain childless because of a medical condition should also be the focus of future research.

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