Riwayat

Original Article

The Meaning of Marriage for Single Career Women in Urban Areas

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Abstract:

This study explores the meaning of marriage among single career women living in urban areas, focusing on how they interpret marriage in relation to ambition, gender roles, and happiness. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the research involved an in-depth interview with a 30-year-old female military doctor. Thematic analysis revealed three main themes: (1) Balancing Ambition and Love, where the participant viewed ambition and affection as two essential but often conflicting life forces; (2) Gender Roles in Marriage, where she expressed egalitarian views, emphasizing equal sharing of domestic and financial responsibilities; and (3) Marriage and Happiness, where communication, emotional maturity, and mutual respect were seen as foundations of marital harmony. For the participant, marriage is not an obligation but a partnership rooted in trust, empathy, and shared goals. She believes happiness in marriage depends on openness and understanding rather than social conformity or material success. Her perspective reflects a modern, independent woman navigating between traditional expectations and personal self-fulfillment. The findings highlight how single career women reinterpret marriage as a personal choice grounded in equality and self-awareness, offering valuable insights for developmental and social psychology, especially regarding the impact of cultural norms and gender roles on women's life decisions.

Keywords: Marriage, Single Women, Career Women, Gender Roles, Social Stigma, Urban Society, Phenomenology.

Introduction

A person who does not have a partner is usually referred to as single. Individuals with single status can be divided into two categories: those who are single due to circumstances that prevent them from having a partner, and those who choose to remain single out of their own preference, refraining from romantic relationships. Being single is often associated with loneliness or misfortune because singles do not have partners. A person who is single due to circumstances is often seen as a failure in relationships, unattractive, or pitiful, while someone who chooses to be single is often perceived as self-centered or closed off.

In general, early adult women who delay marriage do so because they have not found the right partner, though some live single by choice. Some people prefer to maintain their freedom to take risks, experiment, travel, pursue careers, continue their education, or engage in creative work (Feldman, 2022). Hurlock explains that during

their twenties, most unmarried women aim for marriage. However, if a woman remains unmarried by age 30, she tends to shift her goals and values toward career and personal fulfillment. Hurlock concludes that women who remain single after the age of 30 enter a critical age, caught between the desire to marry and the decision to stay single. Research by Wood (2007) found that single women aged 35–65 experience higher levels of pressure, unhappiness, dissatisfaction, stress, depression, and emotional instability compared to married women who enjoy good-quality marriages and healthy relationships with their husbands. These feelings often stem from loneliness, limited friendships, unmet sexual needs, health issues, and work-related challenges.

The phenomenon of living single has emerged globally. From a gender perspective, women tend to set higher standards for marriage than men. Culturally, Indonesian society expects women to become wives and mothers, limiting their social freedom. As a result, families often pressure daughters to marry quickly.

Single women have become a social category often viewed negatively or as "abnormal" compared to married women, who are considered "normal." Typically, adult single women remain unmarried either because they have not found the right partner or because they choose to stay single. Many women value their freedom in decision-making, traveling, experimenting, building careers, or pursuing higher education. However, within a patriarchal society, women's status remains lower than men's, and decision-making often requires male approval.

According to Indonesia's National Population and Family Planning Agency (BKKBN), the ideal marriage age is 21 for women and 25 for men. However, the Indonesia Demographic and Health Survey (IDHS, 2012) found that most young people aged 15–19 believe the ideal marriage age for women is between 22–25 years. About 59.9% of women supported this view, while only 0.7% believed the ideal age is 30 or above.

Although many unmarried women still wish to marry, they tend to be more cautious and deliberate in making the decision. Marriage requires psychological and financial readiness. Therefore, many women no longer see marriage as an urgent need, even amid social and familial pressure. This leads to diverse perspectives among women regarding the meaning of marriage.

Marriage is a sacred event that many people dream of, including women who wish to marry at the right time and only once in their lives. Some adult women wish to marry soon, while others view marriage as a choice, not an obligation. Prof. Subekti, S.H., defines marriage as a long-term relationship recognized by the state. In Indonesia, marriage is deeply rooted in culture and tradition and is viewed as a necessary rite of passage for adults. Consequently, unmarried adult women often face social stigma, ridicule, or unfavorable labels.

Geertz (1981) explained that among Javanese society, marriage is not only a family structure but also tied to economic status and prestige. It is seen as a life cycle that every individual must go through. Marriage is regarded as a social obligation rather than a personal choice. Once married, women are expected to become housewives with numerous domestic duties. Ayu Ratih (2002) noted that these roles, culturally embedded, leave women with little room to choose, as they are framed as obligations.

However, not all women achieve this dream due to various factors—such as the inability to find a compatible partner, restrictive parenting that limits social interaction, or past trauma from negative romantic experiences. Marriage is a social institution in

which both individuals should freely choose each other. For single women with autonomy, marriage should be a personal and well-considered decision without social pressure. Families, however, often still control marriage arrangements for their daughters.

Laswell & Laswell (1987) described single women as those who may be temporarily single before marriage or permanently single by choice. This suggests that singleness can be either a voluntary lifestyle or a condition caused by not finding a suitable partner. While the need for partnership and marriage remains strong, modern women increasingly prioritize career development, leading to delayed marriage. Although many young adult women postpone marriage because they have not found the right partner, others remain single by choice.

Erikson (1968) psychosocial theory describes eight life stages . The sixth stage, intimacy vs. isolation (ages 18–35), emphasizes the ability to form close relationships; failure leads to loneliness. The seventh stage, generativity vs. stagnation (ages 35–64), involves contributing to society and nurturing future generations.

Single women form a distinct social category, often stigmatized as “abnormal” compared to married women. Tajfel & Turner’s (1979) Social Identity Theory, social categorization is a natural cognitive process. Consequently, regardless of individual motivations or achievements, adult single women are often grouped under the label “unmarried,” which carries psychological implications. When a social category is viewed negatively, it lowers the self-esteem of its members. Thus, in many societies, unmarried women are viewed as inferior or “not normal.”

In Malaysia, unmarried women are labeled andartu (old virgins) and are often ridiculed as undesirable. Similarly, in Indonesia, unmarried women are stereotyped as unattractive, flawed, or unworthy, while urban singles are seen as educated, ambitious, and career-oriented women who consciously reject marriage. In the U.S., however, negative stereotypes such as spinster or old maid are becoming outdated.

The persistent stigma surrounding career women makes this topic significant for research. It is important to explore how single women experience and respond to societal stigma and to compare public perceptions with their actual lived experiences. This study aims to promote awareness about these stereotypes and their psychological effects, encouraging a more accepting social attitude toward single individuals.

Although negative social stigma toward unmarried women persists globally, the modern view of singleness as a personal choice and lifestyle has begun to shift perceptions. In communities that embrace gender equality and moderate social values, unmarried women are increasingly recognized as independent, successful individuals who prioritize self-development and career advancement rather than conforming to traditional marriage expectations.

The results of this study are expected to contribute to the development of psychology, particularly developmental and social psychology, by providing empirical insights into societal stigma toward single career women. Practically, the findings aim to help unmarried women better understand and manage social perceptions and fears related to their single status, offering them alternative perspectives and strategies to face societal judgments with greater confidence and self-awareness.

Literature Review

Marriage

1. Definition of Marriage

   Marriage quality refers to the degree of happiness, satisfaction, and stability experienced by a couple in their relationship. According to Knapp & Lott (2010) marital quality encompasses marital happiness, success, and satisfaction—representing both emotional and cognitive evaluations of a relationship. Shehan (2003) views it as a measure of how happy or stable a marriage is, while Fowers & Owens (2010) define it as a subjective assessment of the marital condition and expectations for a shared future. In summary, marital quality reflects an individual's evaluation of how happy, satisfying, and stable their marriage is, along with hopes for long-term well-being.

2. Dimensions of Marriage

   Allendorf & Ghimmire (2013) identified four dimensions of marital quality: satisfaction, communication, togetherness, and conflict management. Nurhayati (2015) grouped these into two: relationship quality (intimacy, respect, and role sharing) and well-being quality (psychological and social harmony). Johnson (2008) proposed five dimensions: (1) marital happiness, (2) interaction, (3) disagreement, (4) problem-solving, and (5) divorce proneness. This study adopts Johnson's framework for assessing marital quality.

3. Factors Influencing Marriage

   Shehan (2003) and Allendorf & Ghimmire (2013) highlight several determinants of marital quality:

   a. Background and past experiences: Similarities in religion, education, and socioeconomic background enhance compatibility.
   b. Social support: Acceptance from family and community improves marital stability.
   c. Children: The birth of a first child often decreases marital satisfaction due to increased responsibilities.
   d. Marriage duration: Marital satisfaction follows a U-shaped curve—high in early years, declining mid-marriage, then rising again later.
   e. Gender and education: Women often report lower satisfaction due to traditional roles, while higher education correlates with better communication and stability.
   f. Partner choice: Self-selected partners tend to experience better marital quality than arranged marriages.

   In conclusion, marital quality is shaped by emotional satisfaction, communication, and external factors such as education, duration, and social environment.

Single Women

1. Definition of Single Women

   Marriage in Indonesia is viewed as a sacred tradition deeply rooted in cultural expectations. Unmarried adult women often face social pressure from family and community to marry. However, maturity is not defined merely by age but also by psychological readiness. According to Laswell & Laswell, single women are those who are temporarily without a partner or who choose long-term singleness as a lifestyle

choice. Thus, being single can result from either circumstance or conscious decision, reflecting independence and personal responsibility for life choices.

2. Types of Single Women

   Nanik (2015) classifies single women into four types:

   a. Voluntary Temporary Singles – Desire marriage but prioritize other pursuits like career or education.
   b. Voluntary Stable Singles – Choose not to marry or remarry and are content with that decision.
   c. Involuntary Temporary Singles – Actively seek partners but have not found one yet.
   d. Involuntary Stable Singles – Hope to marry but accept lifelong singleness as a possibility.

3. Factors Influencing Singleness

   Papalia (2008) identifies several reasons women choose or remain single:

   a. Religious or ideological beliefs – Choosing celibacy as a spiritual commitment.
   b. Divorce trauma – Emotional scars from divorce or parental separation leading to fear of marriage.
   c. Failure to find a suitable partner – Past heartbreaks or unmet personal criteria.
   d. Career focus – Ambitious women often delay or forgo marriage to achieve professional success.
   e. Desire for freedom – Preference for independence, flexibility, and self-determination.

4. Positive and Negative Aspects of Singleness

   Remaining single is not always due to inability to marry but often a personal or pragmatic choice. Positive impacts include autonomy, career fulfillment, and freedom from societal constraints. However, negative aspects may involve loneliness, social stigma, and family pressure. Factors such as past trauma, excessive work focus, dependence on family, and fear of marital conflict often shape women's decision to stay single. Overall, singleness for many women reflects both resilience and the pursuit of self-fulfillment in modern life.

Methods

Research Paradigm

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how individuals interpret meaningful life experiences. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring they met specific criteria relevant to the research focus (Sugiyono, 2017).

Participants

Participants were selected purposively based on the following criteria:

1. A single career woman.
2. Female, never married.
3. Aged 25–60 years.

The participant was chosen to provide in-depth insights into the stigma and meaning of singleness among career women.

Data Collection Methods

Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews and observations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face, recorded with participant consent, and later transcribed for analysis. The interview guide covered themes such as marital happiness, interaction, disagreement, marital problems, and divorce tendencies to understand participants' perspectives on marriage and singleness.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Miles, Huberman & Saldana's (2014) qualitative framework:

1. Data Condensation – selecting, simplifying, and organizing data from interviews.
2. Data Display – presenting information in narrative or tabular form for easier interpretation.
3. Conclusion Drawing – identifying key patterns, meanings, and themes to form conclusions.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed ethical principles by:

1. Informed Consent – ensuring voluntary participation with full awareness of the research purpose.
2. Research Rigor – maintaining accuracy through continuous observation and verification.
3. Use of Supporting Evidence – providing documentation such as recordings, interview notes, and photos to validate findings.

Results

Data Interpretation

1. Theme 1 – Balancing Ambition and Love:

   The participant values achievement and independence but acknowledges internal challenges such as fatigue and self-doubt. While she appreciates her military career, she feels more fulfilled in civilian practice due to greater freedom. Her ultimate goal is a peaceful life with family and emotional balance rather than status or rank.

2. Theme 2 – Gender Roles in Marriage:

   She believes marriage should involve equal roles—both partners share household and financial responsibilities. Expressing affection is done through actions rather than words, emphasizing mutual respect, understanding, and emotional space during conflicts.

3. Theme 3 – Meaning of Marriage and Happiness:

   Marriage, to her, is about unity and understanding between two individuals.

Effective communication is seen as the foundation of happiness, while ego and economic issues are the main causes of conflict. She values emotional control, financial preparedness, and mutual effort as key to maintaining harmony.

4. Theme 4 – Conflict Management and Trust:

   The participant highlights trust, open communication, and emotional maturity as essential. In cases of severe conflict, she would seek external guidance (e.g., a pastor) rather than immediate separation, believing marriage should be preserved through faith, empathy, and shared responsibility.

5. Theme 5 – Respect and Partnership:

   Respect for a spouse includes honoring their family and showing care in daily life. For her, a happy marriage is built on mutual love, comfort, and acceptance of each other's imperfections.

Research Findings and Discussion

This study explored how a single career woman a 30-year-old military doctor, interprets marriage through her experiences of ambition, relationships, and gender roles. Thematic analysis revealed three main themes:

(1) Balancing Ambition and Love,

(2) Gender Roles in Marriage, and

(3) Marriage and the Meaning of Happiness.

Balancing Ambition and Love

Ambition and love emerged as two central forces in the participant's life. She viewed every achievement as meaningful— *"Every day we achieve something. When I graduated elementary school, that was already an achievement… but passing the medical board exam was my biggest one because I stood on my own two feet"*.

Her greatest obstacle was internal— *"The hardest part was myself, being lazy and tired of studying again and again"*. Though proud of her military service, she admitted preferring civilian work: *"In the army, I can't freely express myself; there are hierarchies to follow. Honestly, I'm happier as a civilian doctor"*.

Her life philosophy reflects acceptance and faith: *"Maybe God's plan is different, but it's better that way. I just want a peaceful life with my family someday, sitting in a gazebo eating fried bananas together"*.

Regarding love, she believes marriage should begin when one is ready to grow together: *"If your family supports you and your partner helps you become a better person, start it—don't wait to feel completely ready, because no one ever is"*.

She learned emotional control from her parents: *"My mom was talkative when angry, my dad just listened. If my dad was upset, my mom stayed quiet—it kept the peace"* . She envisions a simple union: *"A partner who accepts me and my family's flaws, who loves and understands me—that's enough"*.

Overall, this theme shows her pursuit of balance—between ambition and affection, duty and self-fulfillment, and faith in divine timing.

Gender Roles in Marriage

The participant holds egalitarian views on marital roles: *"Earning money isn't just a husband's job, and caring for children isn't just a wife's job. Both should share the same responsibilities"*.

She rejects patriarchal norms, viewing marriage as partnership rather than hierarchy: *"A husband's pride doesn't fall just because he changes a diaper or helps at home."* This reflects a shift toward shared domestic and financial duties that enhance marital satisfaction (Johnson, 2008).

Affection, she explained, is shown through actions rather than words: *"In my family, we don't say 'I love you'; we show it. If I see someone I love wanting something but not buying it, I'll get it for them"*. She values calm and patience: *"When angry, I stay silent first to cool down—arguing only makes things worse."*

This theme underscores her belief that emotional maturity and equality form the foundation of a healthy marriage.

Marriage: Does It Bring Happiness?

For the participant, marriage means shared responsibility: *"Marriage isn't about thinking only of yourself; it's learning to understand your partner too"*.She sees communication as the key to happiness: *"Even small things can become big if you don't communicate. Talking openly makes you happier"*.

She identified three main sources of marital conflict—economy, infidelity, and domestic violence: *"Economic problems come from ego—when a wife earns more and feels unappreciated… but what matters is how both control their egos"*.

Her conflict-solving strategies include financial preparedness, living simply, privacy in handling problems, and balanced communication: *"You must have savings or investments. Live within your means and don't let others know your financial struggles"*.

Trust and respect are essential: *"If someone new wants to marry me, I'll see if he supports my career and treats me well"*. Respect extends to family: *"When my husband's family has an event, I'll attend—it shows respect for him, and he'll do the same for mine"*.

In essence, the participant views marriage as a partnership rooted in faith, equality, communication, and emotional balance—not as an escape from loneliness but as a shared journey of mutual growth and understanding.

Conclusion

This study concludes that for participant, marriage is understood as a complex commitment requiring balance between personal needs and shared harmony. Open and honest communication is viewed as the foundation of a healthy, lasting relationship, while trust and mutual respect are seen as essential for stability and emotional security. The participant also holds a progressive view of gender roles, emphasizing equality and flexible task-sharing between partners, reflecting adaptation to modern social values.

Practical Suggestions

Couples should:

1. Foster open, honest communication in all aspects of marriage.

2. Maintain trust and respect through mutual support and appreciation.
3. Express love through actions, such as care and support, rather than relying solely on verbal affection.

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