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TITA, TITA, KAILAN KA MAG-AASAWA?: LOOKING INTO THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF MIDDLE-AGED, UNPARTNERED, AND CHILD-FREE FILIPINAS

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Abstract

In the last few decades, a significant decline in marriage has further increased, together with the strengthening of women's empowerment in the postmodern era. These phenomena have led to an increased acceptance of non-conventional life decisions, specifically among women, who were once pressured by society to achieve roles such as child bearers and homemakers. This qualitative study explored the female experience of being unpartnered and child-free in middle life in the Philippine context. With the phenomenological nature of the study, a purposive sampling technique was used to gather seven middle-aged Filipinas from the province of Bulacan to be interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. The said instrument was validated by both content and language experts. Researchers uncovered deeper meanings from the data using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The findings revealed that familial patterns and personal choice are the leading influences in deciding whether to remain single. Furthermore, contentment in life is observed among the key informants from their strong sense of individuality, family support, freedom from marital stress, and independent lifestyle. However, some key informants later confirmed having emotional and physical challenges despite all the support and advantages. Nevertheless, they manage to maintain an optimistic life. At the end of the study, the researchers came up with an eidetic model that was inspired by a blooming flower, with each part having its representation.

Keywords: Single Women, Filipinas, Child-Free, Middle-Aged, Lived Experiences.

Introduction

Women today embrace diverse opportunities, moving beyond traditional norms. Independence is valued among women, thus settling down is no longer a priority. Globally, there is a significant rise in singlehood among people, claiming that marriage rates in the US, UK, and Australia are currently at an all-time low, and that singlehood has been increasing since the 1990s (Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2020). In 2021, European data shows a strong trend in singlehood among young adult women (Berg & Verbakel, 2021). The same decline in marriage is observed even in non-rich countries, including the Philippines (Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2020). Moreover, in the same year, the United Nations reported that the Philippines has the highest percentage of single people in Southeast Asia (Sukoco, 2024). Additionally, in 2023, a national survey reported that the number of unpartnered citizens also gradually increased by 19% since 2011. However, data also displays that there are more single men than women, making unpartnered women a minority in Philippine society (Social Weather Stations, 2023). In relation to this, the Philippine Statistics Authority confirmed a slight increase in marrying age among Filipinas (Mapa, 2023). Studies also indicate an outstanding growth in education, particularly for females, and their responsibility of taking care of the elderly was recognized as a factor that causes marriages to be delayed (Dommaraju, 2022). Additionally, sociocultural arguments for this drop also include the imbalanced sex ratio at birth, low fertility, employment prospects, and income potential, especially among women (China Statistical Yearbook, 2020, as cited in Danylak, 2022). In 2023, the American Perspectives Survey reported growth in women embracing the single life and the emergence of lowering the economic necessity of marriage as they gain financial independence (Cox, 2023). Meanwhile, some Filipinos reported that getting married means losing their individuality (Danylak, 2022).

The Philippines continues to celebrate “women” and gender equality annually during March with the recurring theme, “WE for gender equality and inclusive society”, a progression from 2016 and through the years of 2023 to 2028 (Philippine Commission on Women, 2024). As the country welcomes and advocates Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality, setting foot on the same ground as men is no longer out of the question. In

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fact, the Philippines remains as the leading Asian country in narrowing down the gender gap, ranking 16th in the world, second in Southeast Asia and the Pacific region, and the only Asian nation in the top 20 (World Economic Forum, 2023). However, despite this progressive movement, Filipino women remain susceptible to stigmatizing questions concerning their long-term plans and well-being as unpartnered persons amidst their age, specifically, "When are you settling down? Do you not plan on having children? Do you not feel lonely being single at your age?" (Cejuela, 2019).

From a Filipino perspective, women's responsibility of providing care and love is essentially valued, especially in a culture that values a close-knit relationship with families (Donato et al., 2023). Being individualistic in a Filipino household means following a narrow path, often facing stigma. For instance, women are: (1) Expected to marry and bear a child by a certain age; (2) Assumed to be problematic when they fail to find a partner (Alwi & Lourdunathan, 2020; Cejuela, 2019; Garriga, 2018). (3) Portrayed by the media in stereotypical and limiting ways, setting social pressure on them (Lapiz et al., 2024; Vandenberghe, 2019). (4) Assumed to end up lonely, especially when they get older (Nicolaisen & Thorsen, 2023). Therefore, the patriarchy keeps the expectations among women absurd and limited.

Furthermore, a study discovered waves of psychological concerns that never-married women over 35 years old and older experience, consequently due to their civil status (Sharak et al., 2021). These concerns were categorized into three themes: first is the "mental spiritual lack," which constitutes the lack of emotional support, fear of uncertain future, mental rumination, and sexual worries; followed by "the reform of culture and society" which makes up with the adverse effect of culture such as stigma, stereotyping, and being overlooked in the society; and lastly, the concern regarding "loneliness arising from disability" which deals with the fear of aging and emerging sickness, and loneliness (Sharak et al., 2021). Thus, this highlights how singleness is influential to middle-aged women's well-being, particularly from a psychological perspective. However, in the Philippines, while traditional expectations and stigmas, particularly to women, are attached to single people (Garriga et al., 2018), single Filipinas from the age of 32 to 38 years old present a meaningful life if anchored to positive pursuits (Mendez et al., 2022). This includes valuing the care for the self, and others, both within and beyond their family; and embracing the freedom and independence of singlehood, giving them a chance to create a strong sense of self rather than just being a wife and a mother (Mendez et al., 2022). From the same study, researchers also discovered the significance of "kapwa," a Filipino core value of "shared sense of self" which means taking care of others whom they considered as "hindi ibang tao" (one of us) and an extension of themselves (Enriquez, 2007, as cited in Mendez et al., 2022), as a fundamental factor in drawing positive source of meaning in life among single women in their thirties. Overall, the pressures from society and health issues, being an unpartnered and child-free woman has both advantages and disadvantages; as a result, lived experiences differ. However, similar in the note that they belong to the feminine category.

Considering these factors above, a study among middle-aged, unpartnered, and child-free Filipinas is vital to be further explored. While previous studies about singlehood among middle-aged are not new, like the studies of Eala in 2003 and Cruz and Ramiro in 2009, the topic is still relevant, urging the need for updated data in the Philippine context. Numerous studies globally have explored the influences of why these individuals remain single. For instance, Apostolou (2020) studied both single men and women using quantitative methods and revealed that some single people prefer being unpartnered so they can have more time for their careers. In 2023, Apostolou conducted another qualitative study on single men and women, exploring their disadvantages in singlehood this time, revealing that more single women value support than single men. The literature on singlehood among Filipinas is out of date, highlighting the need for current information. Recent studies also show limited coverage of the lived experiences among women alike across cultures, that may produce different insights mainly due to cultural and societal nuances (Ang et al., 2020), allowing the researchers to fill these gaps in their chosen topic.

This research used a qualitative approach to answer the fundamental question: What are the lived experiences of middle-aged Filipinas despite not having a lifelong partner or kids? Park et al. (2022) and Sprecher (2021) used the term 'unpartnered' to identify single individuals in their study, which the current researchers have employed to connote single individuals in this study. In addition, to describe single women with no child, the researchers have used the term child-free, framing the said individuals in a positive manner (Stahnke et al., 2022).

This study enriches knowledge about the wellness of middle-aged, unpartnered, and child-free women and strengthens social acceptance of their presence. By concentrating on Filipinas, it supports Sikolohiyang Pilipino by offering up-to-date information for upcoming studies on the unique experiences of this population in the Philippine setting.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Karen Horney's Feminine Psychology, which focuses on understanding women's psychology by acknowledging their perspectives and experiences and how social, cultural, and biological factors shape them.

Feminine Psychology is known for challenging psychology's controversial claims about women, particularly Freud, who believed that "women oppose change, receive passively, and add nothing of their own" (Freud, 1925, as cited in Yadav, 2018). Horney countered the theory by explaining that any form of envy among men and women is not biological but cultural and psychosocial that occurs when men think they are not in control and as powerful as they thought (Acharya, 2018), and penis envy is only a representation of women's envy of the unequal social status between men and women (APA, 2018). She argued that male-centric theories cannot fully explain womanhood (Nickerson, 2024).

With this, Feminine Psychology has influenced cultural, interpersonal, and humanistic psychology, addressing political, economic, and social challenges that affect women (Leung, 2019). It offers a theoretical framework that enables the researchers to investigate gender-related concerns, specifically providing psychological insights that describe the present situations of middle-aged, unpartnered, and child-free Filipinas and how it influenced their outlook.

Conceptual Framework

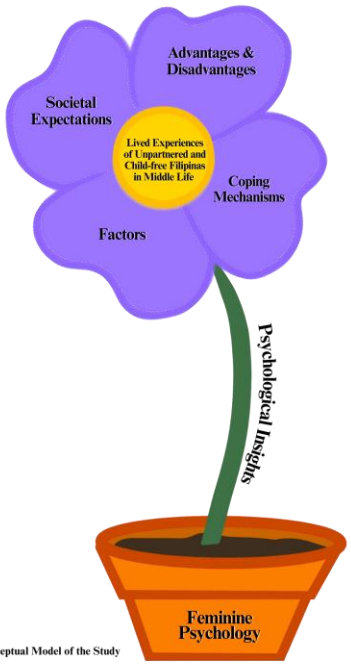


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the Study

Thus, Figure 1 shows the study's conceptual framework presented in a figure of a flower. As shown in the model, the pot represents the theoretical framework, Feminine Psychology, situated as the baseline of the study. The stem leading up represents psychological insights, illustrating the influence between the theoretical framework and the variables of the study. Moreso, the head of the flower represents the Lived Experiences of Unpartnered and Child-free Filipinas in Middle Life. While the petals indicate the aspects associated with the said status. This includes the following: Societal Expectations; Factors; the Advantages and Disadvantages experienced by these individuals; and their Coping Mechanisms. This conceptualization is created to show the aim of the study in which to explore the lived experiences of middle-aged, unpartnered, and child-free Filipinas. This objective was accomplished through a qualitative approach via an in-person interview using a semi-structured instrument, reviewed and validated by selected professionals.

Statement of the Problem

The study sought to inquire to the middle-aged, unpartnered, and child-free Filipinas in Bulacan. Specifically, this study sought to answer to the following questions:

Central Question

What are the lived experiences of middle-aged, unpartnered, and child-free Filipinas in the Province of Bulacan?

Probing Questions

1. What factors have influenced the current disposition of middle-aged Filipinas who are unpartnered and child-free?
2. How do middle-aged, unpartnered, and child-free Filipinas perceive and respond to stereotypical views about them?
3. What are the perceived advantages and disadvantages of being unpartnered and child-free among middle-aged Filipinas?
4. What coping mechanisms do middle-aged, unpartnered, and child-free Filipinas employ to navigate their social and personal experiences?
5. What eidetic model can be crafted to give meaning on the life of the middle-aged, unpartnered, and child-free Filipinas?

Scope and Delimitation

This research aimed to produce an eidetic model through the lens of Feminine Psychology regarding the lived experiences of Middle-aged, Unpartnered, and Child-free Filipinas. The researchers used purposive sampling to identify the key informants.

The study utilized in-person interviews and was conducted during the academic year 2023 - 2024 in Bulacan, Philippines. The researchers followed the strict guidelines of La Consolacion University of the Philippines, obtained ethical approval, and observed data confidentiality as per the Data Privacy Act of 2012.

Methodology

Research Design

This study implemented an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative method designed to investigate people's lived experiences who later interpreted the participants' answers by the researchers (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). It will help understand and identify what it means to be a middle-aged, unpartnered, and child-free woman in a Filipino setting.

Participants/Respondents of the Study

The researchers utilized Sebele-Mpofu and Serpa's (2020) suggested sample size of 6 participants for phenomenological studies, with researchers adding additional key informants to ensure data saturation.

Seven participants were purposively screened and selected before being interviewed in person to provide relevant and appropriate information that aligned with the study's objectives by the following inclusion criteria: they (1) are born female and identify as a woman; (2) must not have a romantic relationship; (3) must not have a child of their own; (4) must be 40 to 60 years of age; (5) must be a Filipino citizen residing in the Province of Bulacan; and (6) are available to be interviewed and are willing to participate in the study. Those who failed to meet these criteria were excluded.

Instrument/(s) of the Study

The study utilized a semi-structured instrument constructed according to the study's related literature, with the interview lasting for at least 45 minutes. It underwent face and content validation by English and Filipino language experts, as well as one registered guidance counselor, one registered psychometrician, and one registered social worker.

The probing questions explored the participants' thoughts on society's perceptions of them, factors that contributed to being unpartnered and child-free, perceived advantages and disadvantages, and coping mechanisms.

Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers employed the following procedures:

1. Created a semi-structured research instrument.
2. Constructed 8 request letters addressed to the department dean, validators, and participants to proceed.
3. The research proposal was submitted to the University's Research Ethics Committee.
4. Received ethical clearance and began screening for potential participants.
5. Qualified participants were scheduled for an in-person interview.
6. During the interviews, the researchers presented and discussed the informed consent form for the participants to sign. This includes permission to document the interview. Also, each interview ended with a debriefing session.
7. The researchers used the data gathered to analyze the results and then contacted the participants to present the study's results and confirm the validity of their answers

The researchers transcribed and translated seven interviews into English, which were then validated by a licensed professional teacher with a PhD in English Language and Literature. Afterward, the translated data were labeled and coded to identify emerging themes using Colaizzi's Method, as Wirihana et al. (2018) recommended, ensuring a rigorous and credible analysis.

Ethical Considerations

The data collection of this study was commenced upon receiving ethical clearance from the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of La Consolacion University Philippines. With this, ethical considerations were highly observed during the data-gathering procedure.

- An informed consent was prepared, presenting the background and objective of the study to ensure that the selected key informants are knowledgeable with the study's direction.
- Participation in the study was voluntary and was purely permitted by selected participants. This was clearly stated in the informed consent and during the briefing, ensuring that no coercion or deception occurred.
- The selected participants have the right to participate or withdraw at any time from the study. They will not be penalized or lose any benefits but are fully entitled to choose whether they decide to participate or not without requiring them to state any reasons for doing so.
- Full confidentiality and compliance with Data Privacy Act of 2012 was strictly observed throughout the session.
- Researchers explained that all gathered data will only be used for academic purposes and were stored securely to prevent unauthorized access or breaches. To avoid any potential misuse or privacy violations, all data will be

destroyed by the promised date of August 31, 2025.

Results and Discussion

- The analysis revealed that the participants' decision to remain unpartnered and child-free arises from a mixture of self and family influences. Personal reason is the first influence, and several participants expressed that they did not want to get married. Family-centered responsibilities also impact their decision, where other participants prefer caregiver roles rather than partnerships. Further, familial patterns influence their openness to singleness since most come from families with a history of remaining unpartnered, which normalizes and validates their choice. Further, fear of potential challenges alongside marriage influenced them to avoid romantic relationships and prevent potential downsides.

- The analysis showed that middle-aged, single women react passively to stereotypical views, which empowers them through self-acceptance and security in their disposition. Many participants expressed no concern about judgments regarding their marital status, for they were satisfied and supported by their families. Family acceptance is crucial because it helps them feel supported rather than criticized, reflecting Filipino values for close familial support. They embrace their uniqueness and emphasize kindness and empathy to others in similar situations by showing acceptance of their path as single, independent women.

- The findings found that the participants experienced advantages and disadvantages to being unpartnered and child-free in midlife. The positive aspects were independence, the sense of autonomy and fulfillment from their freedom, and the lack of family-related responsibilities. They were also contented and happy, mainly from good family ties and the lack of stress from marital/parental duties. Nevertheless, the negative aspect included being alone in aging and in times of illness. However, the overall response reflected that most of them valued their lifestyles, preferring the benefits they garnered over the potential downsides of their independence, and revealed resilience and acceptance of the choices in life.

- The results showed that middle-aged, unpartnered, and child-free Filipinas rely on the utmost support systems and optimism. Fulfillment for them is derived from supportive families and family caregiving while receiving mutual support from family and friends. Together with active involvement in the community and religious activities, it makes them emotionally supported and bolsters their sense of security, peace, and comfort, and to accept one's way in life. The third facet is coping attitudes and methods, manifested through positive thinking, demonstrated as resilience toward societal demands.

- The Empowered Blossoms eidetic model displays personal reasons, family influence, and relationship concerns as leading reasons why some Filipinas remain single and child-free. Further, they embrace independence, close family ties, and community involvement while rejecting societal stereotypes. Despite acknowledging worries about age, loneliness, and illness, they are fulfilled through faith, optimism, and family support. The model exemplifies feminine psychology by demonstrating how these women redefine their identities, flourish outside social norms, and find strength through independence.

Conclusion

- The participants are unpartnered and child-free in midlife due to personal preferences, caregiving responsibilities, normalized familial singleness, and avoidance of marital challenges.
- These Filipinas are indifferent to the stereotypical views of society. Since they exhibit contentment with their lives; they possess a strong sense of individuality; and are heavily supported by their families, making them experience minimal to zero criticisms. Moreso, some also advocate openness and empathy towards the life decisions made by women like them.
- It is notable that while these Filipinas were experiencing some emotional and physical challenges that involved the fear of loneliness in getting old and sickness, they also enjoyed a fulfilling and independent lifestyle brought by the support and encouragement of close-knit family bonds and the freedom and independence which led to an interesting life free of family life responsibilities.
- Coping mechanisms that affirm these Filipinas are comprised of tight family relationships, community and spiritual involvement, and above all, a strong optimistic disposition in an effort to find one's direction, stability, and self-acceptance in life despite societal expectations.
- The Empowered Blossoms model based on Feminine Psychology emphasizes that these Filipinas' self-defined paths are strong,

flourishing, and meaningful in a lifestyle that values individuality and autonomy.

Recommendations

- The researchers suggest exploring the opinions of society from another perspective. In this way, potential researchers can also provide insights from those in the opposing situation.
- Future researchers with similar study may explore more about the Philippines' culture, family-orientedness, as there was notable evidence that the same culture that pressured women to abide by societal expectations is the same factor that supported them with their life decisions anchoring one of the study's emerging theme, empowerment through acceptance and security.
- A study comparing the experiences and perceived advantages and disadvantages of middle-aged and old-aged Filipinas is recommended to understand the difference in perspective regarding being unpartnered and child-free.
- Potential researchers could instead explore the lives of middle-aged, unpartnered, and child-free Filipinas living independently without direct support from an immediate family. This line of investigation may be particularly relevant to understanding coping skills and support networks in managing singlehood in complete independence and, hence, provide more meaning to the experiences of these women.
- Due to the delimitation in the locality of this study, the researchers suggest replicating this study in a different setting and on a broader scale to test if the middle-aged, unpartnered, and child-free Filipinas in other communities have the same experiences as some women alike in the Province of Bulacan.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in this manuscript.

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