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Review Article

Modernization and singlehood in Indonesia: Psychological and social impacts

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Article Info

Abstract

The single lifestyle has become prevalent in Indonesia, whose society strongly upholds the universality of marriage. The societal view of marriage is favorable despite the growth of individualism and the erosion of many conservative values as a result of modernization and globalization. Being single past the social normed marriage age is perceived as deviant in Indonesia. Yet the number of singles delaying marriage or choosing not to marry is increasing and following international trends. People in this category are often defined negatively and may be subjected to derogation. This review examines the relationship between modernization, including online technology, and explores various coping strategies in managing social stigma. The method of this narrative review used a set of criteria to identify relevant contemporary studies mainly published over the last 15 years and discusses the findings and implications of the literature. The findings revealed that the impacts of modernization are inevitable and are changing younger people's values and expectations of marriage leading to a delay in marriage or choosing not to marry. This occurs despite the persistence of conservative social values that maintain a strong pressure toward marriage. Singles opt to develop a number of strategies for managing the tension between traditional social values and their choices to delay marriage, including: opposing marriage ideology, using humor, gaining social support, and attaching to religious values and rituals.

Introduction: Singlehood as a Global Phenomenon

In the United States since the 1970s, 50 percent of marriages end in divorce (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2000). However, over the last 20 years the divorce rate has demonstrated a downward trend (Miller, 2014; Wong, 2014). This does not mean however that marriage quality has improved. The decreasing divorce trend parallels the delayed age of marriage (US Census Bureau, 2015), the increase in cohabitation (Copen, Daniels, Vespa, & Mosher, 2012; Daugherty & Copen, 2016), and the rising proportion of individuals choosing not to marry (US Census Bureau, 2016). A similar pattern can also be found in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016), Europe (Corselli-Nordblad & Gereoffy, 2015), and many Asian countries (Jones & Yeung, 2014). Marriage, which traditionally has been an expected norm for adults, is now apparently regarded as less desirable.

Indonesia is following the global trend regarding singlehood (Situmorang, 2007). Although the proportion of singles is not as great as in neighboring countries such as

Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan, and Singapore (see Figure 1), the number of singles in Indonesia is increasing (Hull, 2002; Jones, 2010).

Locating recent data regarding never-married adults in Indonesia is challenging because the available data is population based where marital status is one of a number of variables with little explanatory information sought (Pemerintah Provinsi DKI Jakarta, 2014). Other data use a simple group categorization with broad age ranges, such as: 'marital status among people ages 10 years and above' (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2016d). This kind of population-based data does not provide sufficient specificity to adequately examine the trend towards singleness.

However, the most recent national census data in 2010 suggests a gradual increase in number of single women aged 35–39 years, being 3.8 percent (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2010a), from 1.4 percent in 1970 and 3.5 percent in 2000 (Jones, 2010). This suggests a nearly threefold increase in the never-married adult population within the last four decades. Moreover, the National Statistical Bureau noted that the mean age at marriage for women was 22.3 years and for men was 25.7 years in 2010 (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2010a); while in 1970 women began to marry at age 19 years, and men at age 23 years (Jones, 2010). This indicates a trend toward delayed age of marriage for both genders and an increase in the time people may remain single.

While the prevalence of singleness is increasing, there is also an increasing quality of life among singles. While numerous studies report that marrieds are happier than singles (for example, Myers, 2000), a national survey in 2014 (n = 70,631 respondents) reported that singles in Indonesia had a similar level of happiness (68.77%) with marrieds (68.74%) (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2015). Compared to the similar survey conducted a year before, a trend of increased happiness among singles can be observed as in 2013, marrieds (65.31%) were still found to be happier than singles (64.99%). Although those studies do not provide more specific data regarding the aspects of happiness being examined, the findings suggest that the single lifestyle among young adults is being perceived relatively positively.

Notwithstanding the fact that singles are happier than couples, choosing to live as a single in Indonesian society is challenging. Singles are often judged, derided, or even discriminated against (Jones, 2010; Refugee Review Tribunal of Australian Government, 2010; Situmorang, 2007). Moreover, Indonesian government policy favors the conventional view of marriage, and prohibits cohabitation and premarital sex (Fachrudin, 2016), and does not acknowledge marriage alternatives such as: *de facto* relationships. Living as a single in Indonesia has challenges as there are no legitimate alternate relationship options other than marriage to fulfill emotional and sexual needs.

Aims and Scope of This Review

The aim of this review is to examine the underlying social factors related to singleness as a result of
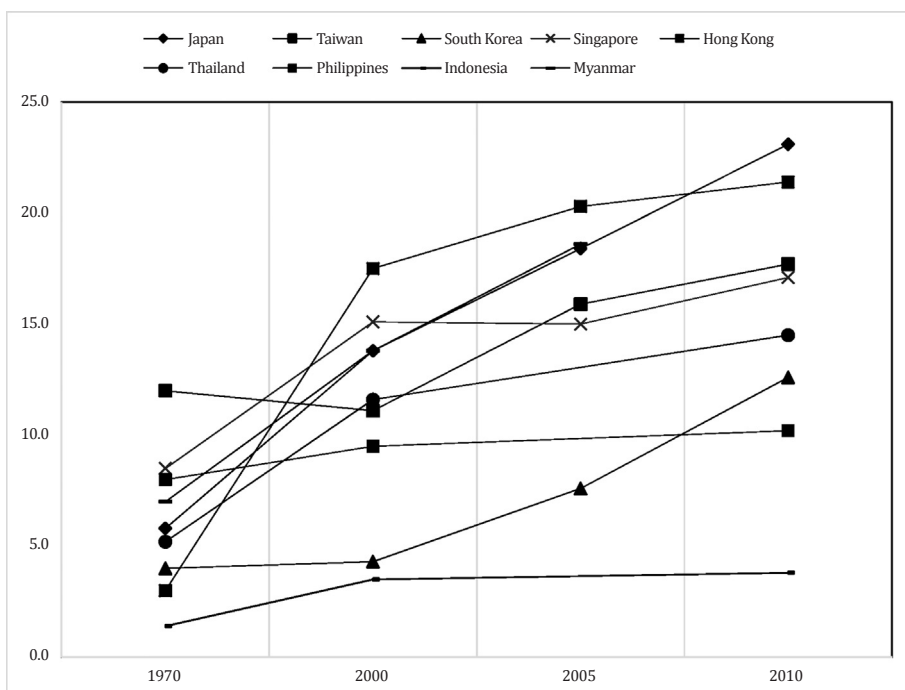
Figure 1 Percentage of single women proportions aged 35–39 years in selected Asian countries from 1970 to 2010
Sources: Census and Statistics Department Hong Kong (2011); Department of Statistics Singapore (2016); Jones (2010); Korean Statistical Information Service (2012); National Statistics Republic of China (Taiwan) (2010); United Nations (2017); Yoshida (2017). Note: Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia data were not available for 2005; Myanmar data were not available for 2010

modernization. Coping strategies used by singles are also examined in terms of effectiveness to promote psychological and social well-being. Indonesia is one of the largest countries in Asia and has a number of cultural groups. While this study is focused on Indonesia, the findings have relevance for other Asian countries in the same region where there are cultural similarities. This is the first review to examine the question of singleness from an Asian perspective as the existing literature is dominated by Western research.

Methodology

A narrative review methodology was applied, which involved conducting a database search to identify relevant published literature on the topic. The following databases were used: PsycArticles, PscyINFO, Scopus, and Science-Direct. We primarily focused on the publication dates between 2002 and 2017 to ensure currency of the information used in this review. Themes indicative of the influence of modernization toward singlehood and many singles' coping ways to manage their challenges were examined. Keywords combining singlehood, modernization, or globalization, and Asian and Indonesian contexts were selected and the search criteria included both qualitative and quantitative studies. Studies were included if their participants were never-married, heterosexual singles, as there are separate issues involved with single parents, divorced, and LGBT people in Indonesia.

This paper was built primarily based on 30 studies focusing on singlehood in the various contexts. Among those studies, 18 were about singlehood in general and Western contexts, nine studies were about singlehood in the Asian context, which also included comparative studies in which Indonesia was one of the population being compared, and three studies that were extensively conducted in Indonesia.

Who is Counted as Single?

The legal definition of being single in Indonesia is defined as those who are in the government records registered as non-married (DePaulo & Morris, 2006, 2011). Despite being a civil status, singleness is also a social status (Simpson, 2016). For the purposes of this review, singleness refers to those who have never been married and are not currently in a cohabiting relationship. This definition is justified as it is the never-married group whose numbers have been increasing in Indonesia during the last decades (Hull, 2002; Jones & Yeung, 2014; Jones, 2010).

Singles and Happiness

There is research in the literature that demonstrates many benefits of marriage compared to being single, while in the same studies, singles are often attributed with negative outcomes. Kessler and Essex (1982), for instance, found that married adults are likely to outperform singles in dealing with many life pressures, such as intimacy, economic issues, and even housework. Numerous following studies articulate that finding by empirically presenting the significant correlation between marriage and happiness (Kaufman & Taniguchi, 2010; Notara et al., 2015; Stack & Eshleman, 1998; Stutzer & Frey, 2006), although several studies argued that such findings were methodologically flawed due to the failure to control extraneous variables (Chapman & Guven, 2016; DePaulo & Morris, 2011; Lucas, Georgellis, Clark, & Diener, 2003).

The degree to which some singles may be happier than others is closely related to the motive of being single. For instance, DePaulo often attributed those who are singles as *'single at heart'*, this terminology refers to those who are voluntarily single, and therefore argues that singles should not be less happy than marrieds (DePaulo & Morris, 2006, 2011; Morris & DePaulo, 2009; Morris, Sinclair, & DePaulo, 2007). There are singles who do not like their condition and would like to marry. Singles who are not single by choice may feel stressed and resentful (Shostak, 1987). The contemporary literature divides singles into two broad types single by choice (voluntarily single) and by circumstance (involuntarily single) (for example, Adamczyk, 2016; Slonim, Gur-Yaish, & Katz, 2015).

What Causes Singleness: Modernization, Technology, and the Single Lifestyle

Many factors interplay in explaining the growing single numbers. Among Indonesian single women, Situmorang (2007) asserts some complex factors ranging from educational level, career opportunities and aspirations, and certain family circumstance. Among these factors the family circumstance may be a culturally defined construct as in most Asian countries including Indonesia, younger members of the family are expected to be responsible for looking after the elderly, including parents or grandparents (Jones, 2007). While younger men may take responsibility in term of finance, younger women are often burdened by their obligation to take care of the elderly's daily living which limits their social interaction. This may partially explain the reasons for remaining single by circumstance especially among women.

Modernization has an impact on singleness as it has caused an economic and political transformation. Modernization has a wider impact on society, specifically social transformations (Rössel, 2012). The advanced growth of economic activity stimulates urbanization, bureaucratization, democratization, gender equality, higher education, and job opportunity (Rössel, 2012). It also evokes a transformation at the psychological level, including: increased personal efficacy, greater financial independence, self-independence, equality of gender, distancing from traditional beliefs, and acceptance of global culture (Hamamura, 2012).

Many countries have undergone meaningful transformation in this era, including Indonesia. One of the indicators of modernization is a higher population density, which occurs as more people from rural areas move to the urban locations (Stockemer & Sundström, 2014). Indonesia is currently recorded as a country with the largest increase in the urban population density (World Bank, 2015), placing Java Island as the most favorite urban areas with

over 56 percent of Indonesian citizens residing there (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2014). The persistent trend of urbanization is deemed to bring considerable impact to the shifting of lifestyle in society, particularly in favoring later marriage and the single lifestyle.

In the following part, the influence of modernization to the perception of marriage is seen through four indicators: gender equity, shifting of personal values, availability and acceptability of marriage-like forms, and impacts of technology.

Gender Equity in the Education and Industry

The Gender Equity Act resulted in increased numbers of women participating in education (Furstenberg, 2015; Hull, 2002; Jones, 2010). In Indonesia, Raden Adjeng Kartini is known as a pioneer of the feminist movement at the end of 1890s (Connell, 2013). Since then, female school attendance has increased to 40 percent of total enrollment in 1965 (Fischer, 1965). In 2015, female school attendance was 60.77 percent, higher than their male counterpart (58.74%) (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2016a). The proportion of women currently commencing university education is slightly higher (2.62%) than for men (2.27%) (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2016c).

With the development of the industrial sector and the growing demand for qualified workers, there has been an increase in professional career opportunities. As more women graduate from university their career opportunities have also increased. Data show that during the last 15 years, women's participation in the workforce has been 9.5 percent higher than for men (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2016b). With regard to career development, women now have superior employment opportunities compared to men (Furstenberg, 2015).

There are two consequences of greater female participation in the workforce. First, their preoccupation to build career paths subsequently reduces leisure time for socializing and meeting potential marriage partners and they may be less prepared to marry before they have established their career (Yoshida, 2017). Secondly, as women have careers and are financially independent, they no longer need to be married to support themselves which gives them the freedom of greater choice as to who to marry. There is now a higher expectation on the qualities of a marriage partner and women in the professions report it difficult to meet males who meet their requirements. At the same time, society still favors the hypergamy norm of marriage, which prescribes the ideal marriage as between a man with higher socioeconomic status and a woman with lower status than that of man (Qian & Qian, 2014). The lower marriage rates are therefore not a result of a shortage of males but a lack of men with higher expected financial and social potential as set by single professional women (Furstenberg, 2015; Hull, 2002; Jones, 2007, 2010).

Shifting Personal Values

Modernization creates generational shifts in economic and personal values. People congregate in urban areas to be close to greater employment opportunities. The World Bank (2016) noted that the urbanization rate in Indonesia is 4.1 percent per year, which is higher than in other Asian countries. Furthermore, it is projected that as many as 68 percent of the total population in Indonesia will live in cities by 2025. Urbanization creates greater focus on individual needs as people must take responsibility for their own housing, and manage earnings and expenses. Decisions are often made without including family members, which is different in rural areas where family members may be involved in all decisions made by the individual (Sachs, 2005). Personal individualism is fostered and society begins to acknowledge some degree of individual autonomy regarding personal decisions (Rössel, 2012). This phenomenon might be reflected in the proportion of never-married adults in urban areas (6.02%) that is almost double that for those living in rural areas (3.5%) (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2010b).

Cohabitation as a Marriage Alternative

Cohabitation has been considered as a viable option by some adults (Furstenberg, 2015). In the Indonesian context, cohabitation is still considered to be against the law (Fachrudin, 2016). Despite the legal prohibitions and social non-acceptance, the prevalence of cohabiting relationships is increasing (Jones, 2010; Situmorang, 2007). Numerous studies have shown that many younger people tend to be more accepting of pre-marital and non-marital sex (Djannah, Murti, Prabandari, & Anantanyu, 2016; Situmorang, 2003).

Impacts of Technology

Another outcome of modernization is the advanced growth of communications technology (Rössel, 2012), which now influences how people live and socially interact. Indonesians are among the top Internet users in the world and the proportion of Internet users has increased tenfold between 2004 and 2015 (World Bank, 2016). While the evidence has successfully delineated the positive use of online communication (Knobloch-Westerwick, Johnson, & Westerwick, 2013; Mesheriokova & Tebb, 2016; Schlarb & Brandhorst, 2012), there is a down side. Studies also show negative impacts of online activities on lifestyle and well-being (Jonsson, Priebe, Bladh, & Svedlin, 2014; Shochat, 2012).

With regards to the sexual gratification that is often considered as a propelling factor leading people to marry (Kwong & Yin, 2000), the Internet provides numerous sources of sexual gratification such as pornography which provides some outlet for sexual desires. Younger single adults consider the use of pornography as an acceptable practice. However, the use of pornography influences people's perception of sex and its expression. Streaming sexual content has been found to alter people's arousal and response cues and to have a negative impact on normal sexual relationship with a partner. Interactive websites where people can indulge in sexual behaviors have been shown to erode the capacity to create emotional intimacy and to tolerate frustration in person-to-person relationships (Drouin, Vogel, Surbey, & Stills, 2013). It also creates a

distorted expectation as to the realities of a long term sexual relationship with a partner and prioritizes sexual excitement over relationships. Developing a sex life online has been shown to reduce the willingness to marry (Malcolm & Naufal, 2014). While what is reported here has largely focused on males, it remains unknown as to the extent that females engage in online sexual behavior and to the extent it may impact on their willingness to marry. However, in some other Asian countries and in the West, female use of online pornography is thought to be approaching male rates in some instances.

A positive finding regarding online technology is that it assists singles to overcome emotional challenges. Loneliness is the predominant feeling singles may experience (Wang & Abbott, 2013), and the use of the Internet can be a means to reduce loneliness. Amichai-Hamburger and Ben-Artzi (2003) demonstrate that the relationship between loneliness and the frequency of the Internet use is causal, suggesting that it is loneliness that leads to excessive Internet use, rather than the use of the Internet that makes someone feels lonely. Therefore singles may interact with others on-line to meet social needs. Access to others on-line can be spontaneous and driven by people's needs at the time. So it provides an immediate solution to feelings of loneliness or boredom. However the use of the Internet for social interaction can also become problematic. An over-reliance on online socializing has been shown to be associated with both loneliness and dating anxiety (Shepherd & Edelmann, 2005). While the use of the Internet may help singles in managing loneliness, excessive reliance on the Internet may potentially lead to more severe psychological problems.

Singles in Indonesia as a Target of Despisement

While modernization influences individual lifestyle and personal values particularly among younger adults, the majority of Indonesian society is attached to conservative and pseudo-religious based beliefs (Himawan, 2013). In this context, marriage is regarded as a social achievement and as being mandatory for every adult of marriageable age (Situmorang, 2007). As a result, remaining single is socially defined as being a failure and singles past marriageable age are negatively stigmatized.

Women may be subject to greater stigmatization. A popular term for single women in Indonesia is 'perawan tua' (meaning: spinster) (Nanik & Hendriani, 2016; Situmorang, 2007), whereas there is no known term for single men. Single women approaching or passing the acceptable marriageable age are blamed for being too choosy and selfishly selective. Nonetheless, Lahad (2013) argues that being selective for single women can be legitimate even if it is contradictory to social definition. Being selective provides women with 'social power' as it puts them in the position of being the choice maker. No published study has been identified that examines the psychological impact of social stigma on singles. However, unpublished pilot data suggests that only 14 percent of singles reported low social pressure, while more than 25 percent of singles reported high and extremely high social pressure (Himawan, 2017).

Many Coping Ways for Singles in Indonesia

Opposing the Ideology of Marriage

One method of dealing with the social pressure to marry is to create counter arguments to the values and beliefs around marriage. DePaulo (DePaulo, 2013, pp. 302–316; DePaulo & Morris, 2006, 2011) emphasized that being single does not mean being inferior and singles may be happier than many married people. Many single adults in Indonesia use this argument to provide a defense to negative social stereotyping.

Nevertheless, Kaiser and Kashy (2005) argued that opposing societal ideology of marriage is unlikely to be successful in reducing stigma as social stereotypes embedded in long held values may take generations to change. Social values also are reflected in psychological mechanisms. Being married meets people's attachment needs and also gives people a sense of social legitimacy and allows them to participate in a well understood social institution which increases the sense of inclusion and meaning. Deviance from social norms is not well tolerated as it challenges shared universally accepted assumptions. Therefore, if a single were to promote being happy, society in general is more likely to dismiss this position than to accept it through modification of current beliefs. This argument is exaggerated by Day (2016) who used system justification theory to conclude that people may firmly believe in marriage ideology in order to defend the status quo, because by holding on to such ideology they will gain the perception of predictability, structure, and control over life.

Humor

Rather than battling societal perception toward marriage, singles also use humor as a method of coping. Parrish and Quinn (1999) claim that humor may be the third human mechanism after fight-or-flight responses as it is a method of coping with things unlikely to change while protecting wellbeing. The growing body of literature suggests humor is an effective coping strategy in many life contexts (Booth-Butterfield, Booth-Butterfield, & Wanzer, 2007; Henman, 2008), although no research has examined humor in relation to managing being single.

Using humor to deal with being single is evident in Indonesian society. For example, an Internet-based social group declared themselves as 'Dewan Kesepian Jakarta' (Jakarta's Lonely Council) was created in 2014 and they frequently post humorous material regarding the dilemmas of being single. This group provides support for singles and attempts to educate society that being single can be an informed choice (Franciska, 2016). This group has proved reasonably popular with over 17,000 followers since its inception. The public education strategies may have potential in reducing the stigma associated with being single.

Offline and Online Social Support

DePaulo and Morris (2011) believe that singles have more free time to form various relationships with family

and friends and this can meet their social needs. However, in a comparative study among singles in Jakarta, Manila, and Bangkok, singles in Jakarta, were found to be more reluctant to establish peer relationships and were more self-reliant in solving personal problems (Tan, 2010). Moreover, never-married women in Jakarta were also found to have less defined roles within their families compared to those in Bangkok and Manila. Tan (2010) argues that the low societal acceptance towards singles in Jakarta causes them to be marginalized.

In the world of digital technology, social support may also come in an online form. Numerous studies support the effective use of online social support (Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011; Moore & Ayers, 2016) through utilizing blogs or social networking sites (SNSs). However, it is crucial to note that the mechanism by which online social support plays an adaptive role may be different to that of offline support. A study showed that those who have sufficient online support do not necessarily perceive that they have enough support in their real life (Li, Chen, & Popiel, 2015). Therefore, face-to-face social support is required for the online social support to be effective (Mazzoni, Baiocco, Cannata, & Dimas, 2016). This is an important issue for future research to examine the extent that singles reduce socializing with others due to a fear of stigmatization resulting in an overreliance on online support.

Religious Participation

Another method of coping with being single is through an increased participation in religious activities. Kirkpatrick (1992) argues that having spiritual connection with God may meet the human need to belong and provide an attachment figure. Granqvist and Hagekull (2009) found that singles receive several advantages from pursuing religious practices. These include increasing a sense of belonging and social connection through involvement with religious groups. Singles may also experience less discrimination in the religious environment since religious values often discourage stigmatization (Dingemans & Ingen, 2015). The feeling of belonging is often strengthened by singles finding a religious community that is aligned with their personal religious beliefs. Mana, Sagy, and Srour (2016) showed that religion provides a shared identity which provides a greater sense of acceptance for active members of a religion in the community.

Indonesian society defines religious belief and participation in a positive way and actively favors those with clear religious attributes (Crouch, 2012; Imanda, 2011). So participating in religiosity provides a culturally sanctioned method for singles to manage discrimination. Singles who are identified as religious are more likely to be thought of as remaining single because of their devotion and commitment to the religion rather than as a result of character issues. However, Himawan, Bambling, and Edirippulige (2017) argue that there is a risk of maladaptive religious coping when the motive is for social acceptance and not from a genuine engagement with the beliefs and spiritual practices of the religion.

Summary and Recommendation

Indonesia is following a rather similar path to that of other countries regarding the singlehood phenomenon and the rate of change in the singles lifestyle is outstripping changes in social values concerning marriage. This phenomenon creates real and serious adaptive challenges for those who are single longer than the social norms would allow.

The fact that single status denotes a negative attribution causes topics related with singlehood to be regarded as sensitive issues, which eventually leads to a lack of studies conducted in this area. This study has attempted to shed light on the socio-psychological challenges of Indonesian singles along with many alternative coping ways to manage their challenges. It is expected that this study could stimulate more relevant studies in the future. More empirically based investigations into this issue are definitely needed to delineate this phenomenon in light of the evidence uncovered, particularly to address key findings relevant to promote singles' well-being. Those findings would be useful to assist the government and other related organizations in shaping policy and modifying existing customs regarding the perception of marriage and singlehood. Appropriate actions to promote marriage as a personal choice are urged to protect and maintain the well-being for both involuntary and voluntary singles and to provide a sense of respect to individuals choosing to marry or to remain single.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments

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