

Growing Without a Partner: Finding Meaning in Life for Single Career Women through Lifelong Learning

Bertumbuh tanpa Pasangan: Memaknai Hidup pada Wanita Karier Lajang melalui Lifelong Learning

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Abstract

Women who choose to live single lives while pursuing careers are viewed as unusual in society. Understanding the meaning in life for single career women will provide insight into how they interpret their lives as individuals who live independently while facing social pressure related to their life choices and professional roles. The purpose of this study is to understand the meaning of life for single career women. This research was conducted using qualitative methods through an interpretive phenomenological study approach. Five participants aged 30-35 years with more than five years of work experience were selected purposively, with the criteria of not having a partner or being unmarried. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and analyzed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method. The results showed that the five participants found meaning in their lives through exploring various positive things and committing to lifelong learning, namely by continuing to open themselves up to new experiences, developing skills, and organizing themselves to live a more meaningful and purposeful life. This study highlights that meaning in life for single career women does not appear suddenly, but is formed through a process of self-reflection, acceptance, and self-development.

Keywords : Meaning in life, career women, single

Abstrak

Wanita yang memilih menjalani kehidupan melajang sekaligus mengejar karier dipandang sebagai suatu hal yang tidak lazim dalam masyarakat. Memahami makna hidup pada wanita karier lajang akan memberikan pemahaman mengenai bagaimana mereka memaknai kehidupannya sebagai individu yang menjalani kemandirian sekaligus menghadapi tekanan sosial terkait pilihan hidup dan peran profesionalnya. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk memahami makna hidup pada wanita karier lajang. Penelitian ini dilakukan dengan metode kualitatif melalui pendekatan studi fenomenologi interpretatif. Lima partisipan berusia 30-35 tahun dengan pengalaman kerja selama lebih dari lima tahun dipilih secara purposive, dengan kriteria tidak memiliki pasangan atau belum menikah. Data dikumpulkan dengan wawancara mendalam semi terstruktur dan dianalisis menggunakan metode Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kelima partisipan menemukan makna hidupnya melalui eksplorasi berbagai hal positif dan komitmen terhadap lifelong learning, yaitu dengan terus membuka diri pada pengalaman baru, mengembangkan keterampilan, serta menata diri agar menjalani kehidupan dengan lebih

bermakna dan terarah. Penelitian ini menyoroti bahwa makna hidup pada wanita karier lajang tidak muncul secara tiba-tiba, tetapi terbentuk melalui proses refleksi diri, penerimaan, dan pengembangan diri.

Kata Kunci : Makna hidup, wanita karier, lajang

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Badan Pusat Statistik shows that the majority of women in Indonesia get married for the first time between the ages of 19 and 21. In addition, Badan Kependudukan dan Keluarga Berencana Nasional (BKKBN) recommends that the ideal age for women to get married is 21 (Indonesiabaik.id, 2024). Currently, Indonesian culture generally still places women in domestic roles, giving rise to the stigma that women do not need to have a high level of education or career. Women are often expected to marry early and take on the roles of wife and housewife (Zulaikha & Firmonasari, 2023). Social trends show that the number of single young people in Indonesia is increasing. Data from Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS) in 2024 reports that 69.57 percent of young people in Indonesia were unmarried in the last year. This figure shows an increase from the previous year, which was 68.29 percent (Kumparan, 2025).

This phenomenon is closely related to the characteristics of early adulthood, which is an important stage of development when individuals are expected to complete various developmental tasks in order to live a good and happy life. According to Hurlock, early adulthood has several tasks, including choosing a life partner, learning to live with a spouse, forming a family, raising children, and managing a household (Paputungan, 2023). In addition, young adults aged 18-40 begin to move towards independence and start looking for and choosing jobs to meet their various needs (Widiyawati & Dewi, 2022). This phenomenon is in line with the findings of The Collage Dating Divide study, which reports that highly educated women often have difficulty finding potential partners who meet their standards or criteria, making delayed marriage increasingly common (Institute for Family Studies, 2023).

In line with this, Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory explains that early adulthood (18-40 years) is characterized by the conflict of "intimacy vs. isolation". At this stage, individuals strive to build close relationships involving trust, commitment, and emotional closeness. If individuals succeed in this stage, they will develop love as a psychological strength and intimacy, while failure can lead to isolation and loneliness (Uroidli et al., 2024). This is in line with research on individuals who do not have partners, which shows that they have lower levels of life satisfaction than individuals who do have partners (Walsh et al., 2022).

Several relevant studies show that single individuals can experience significant negative psychological effects. One study found that people who have never had a partner in their lives show lower life satisfaction than those who have partners (Stern et al., 2024). Another study also shows that social pressure is an important factor that affects the psychological well-being of single women who internally desire married status, despite cultural pressure or external perceptions regarding single status (Maryanto et al., 2024). Instead of viewing marriage or having a partner as a phase that must be achieved for life satisfaction, some women choose to live single as a form of self-actualization (Ekayanti & Nurchayati, 2023). This phenomenon

shows a new perspective that women who live single can still find and build meaning in their lives.

Method

This study uses a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach in an interpretive paradigm. Through this study, it is hoped that the meaning of life found by career women during their single years in their 30s and 40s can be revealed. This study also aims to reveal how they interpret their single status in their lives. Therefore, this qualitative study uses a phenomenological approach with an interpretive paradigm. This study was conducted in Surabaya and its surrounding areas.

Participant

The subjects in this study were adult women who focused on their careers and chose to remain single. The research subjects were selected using purposive sampling, which is a method of deliberately selecting samples based on certain criteria deemed relevant and appropriate by the researcher (Subhaktiyasa, 2024). The criteria for research subjects included: (1) Women over 30 years of age; (2) Unmarried/without a partner; (3) Employed.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection techniques in this qualitative study were conducted through interviews and observations (Fiantika et al., 2022). Interviews were used to explore information in depth, both in the preliminary study stage and in understanding the perspectives and experiences of participants, because they focused on self-reports and individual beliefs, thus providing a richer understanding of their views and experiences (Wijoyo, 2022). This study used semi-structured interviews. In addition, observations were conducted to obtain data through direct observation of the participants' behavior, activities, and interactions in their natural context, so that researchers could capture phenomena that might not emerge through interviews and gain a more comprehensive understanding (Weston et al., 2021).

Data Analysis

The data analysis technique used in this study is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The IPA method is considered appropriate because it focuses on understanding how individuals give meaning to important experiences in their lives in a natural context (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Phenomenological research focuses on understanding human experiences. In the process of understanding these experiences, IPA relies on three pillars, namely phenomenology as its philosophical basis, hermeneutics as a theory of interpretation, and idiography, which emphasizes the study of individual uniqueness (Kahija, 2017).

Results

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with five participants, namely SA, ON, VP, YK, and NN. The code for each interview excerpt used was SA-P1-W1, where SA is the participant's initials, P1 indicates the first participant, and W1 refers to the first interview. This study successfully revealed the strategies of meaning in life, namely acceptance, trust, commitment, discovery, and evaluation. This study found seven sub-themes, namely: 1) Acceptance of Reality and Self, 2) Principles of Life, 3) Exploration of Positive Activities, 4) Lifelong Learning 5) New Learning, 6) Change in Thinking, and 7) Self-Development.

Table 1. Theme Table

	Theme	Subtheme
Strategic of Meaning in Life	Acceptance	Acceptance of Reality and Self
	Belief	Principles of Life
	Commitment	Exploration of Positive Activities
	Lifelong Learning	
	Discovery	New Learning
	Evaluation	Change in Thinking
	Self-Development	

1. Theme 1: Acceptance

The participant's ability to accept the reality of their current life, including their single status, social demands, and the dynamics of their career and personal life.

a) Acceptance of Reality and Self

All participants have accepted their circumstances, themselves, and the reality that they are currently unmarried or do not have a partner. This acceptance involves several processes. ON participants undergo a process of acceptance that emphasizes self-development and self-improvement, accompanied by the belief that by improving and preparing themselves, they will attract a partner who has good qualities that are in line with themselves.

“[...] Jodoh itu sebenarnya kan bukan dicari ya tapi dibentuk, mangkannya kenapa aku tuh mau fokus dengan diriku sendiri, dengan kepercayaan, kalau aku membentuk diriku sendiri dengan baik, nanti yang baik-baik juga akan dapet” (ON-P2-W1)

2. Theme 2: Belief

Trust is one of the sources of meaning in life that plays an important role in helping individuals deal with uncertainty, social pressure, and life's challenges.

a) Principles of Life

The principle of life helps participants to survive, thrive, and give more positive meaning to their life journey. YK participants uphold the principle of survival for themselves and want to love themselves.

“[...] Alasan terbesarku untuk hidup ya diriku sendiri karena aku pernah seputus asa itu sama hidup gitu jadinya aku pingin enggak ini, nggak ngerasakan kekosongan sampai nggak sayang sama diri sendiri gitu, karena nggak enak lo rasanya ketika nggak dicintain diri sendiri [...]” (YK-P4-W2)

3. Theme 3: Commitment

The process of developing and realizing one's full potential, which participants achieve through accomplishing life goals, taking on meaningful roles, and actively engaging in activities that align with their personal values and interests.

b) Exploration of Positive Activities

Exploring positive activities is an effort by participants to identify and engage in activities that increase happiness, provide energy, and help individuals live a more balanced and meaningful life. VP participants explore positive activities through writing and handcrafting.

“[...] Karena aku suka nulis ya, tapi sebenarnya nulis kan outputnya cuma tulisan doang toh, aku suka handcrafting, jadi kalo aku buka tiktok atau ig, aku lihat kerajinan tangan gitu-gitu, aku selalu pengen bikin, aku selalu ngembangin potensi aku [...]” (VP-P3-W2)

c) Lifelong Learning

Lifelong Learning is an internal drive that participants have to continue acquiring new knowledge, skills, and understanding. ON participants have a desire to learn through fields that are relevant to their work.

“Soal data data analyst, terus habis itu soal leadership, itu kan soalnya menurutku memimpin itu kan tidak semudah itu ya, dengan banyak karakter anak-anak sekarang tuh, banyak kepala, itu aku harus selalu belajar menghadapi anak ini gimana, nge-lead anak ini gimana” (ON-P2-W1)

4. Theme 4: Discovery

Self-discovery is a process experienced by participants in recognizing, understanding, and building their identity through their life experiences.

a) New Learning

All participants indicated that their life experiences provided them with a variety of new lessons. Participant YK learned that being too demanding of herself caused her stress and led her to set expectations that were too high.

“[...] Dulu tu aku selalu menekankan kata harus, kayaknya aku harus menerima kayaknya aku harus bisa ini, kayaknya aku harus bisa itu. Tapi ternyata, dengan kata harus itu aku jadi tertekan sendiri, terus ekspektasiku ke diri sendiri itu terlalu tinggi, jadi aku makna hidup yang aku rasakan sekarang adalah belajar [...]” (YK-P4-W1)

5. Theme 5: Evaluation

Evaluation is a process experienced by participants in the way they think, behave, and interpret life as a result of reflecting on their life experiences.

a) Change in Thinking

A change in mindset is a cognitive process characterized by a shift in participants' way of thinking about themselves, their lives, and their single status as a result of life experiences and self-reflection. Participant ON revealed that at the age of 25, in line with existing social norms, women generally want to get married immediately. However, when participant ON was not yet married at that age, she now accepts that each individual has a different timeline in life.

“[...] Pasti dulu, umur-umur 25 tuh pasti orang-orang tuh kayak, kapan nih nikah? Kayak banyak tekanan-tekanan seperti itu kan. Nah, di umur-umur segitu, pasti cewek tuh udah pengen-pengennya nikah. Tapi ternyata aku belum mengalami itu, belum ke arah sana hidup aku. Nah di saat umur lagi pengen-pengennya mikir ke arah sana, tapi ternyata aku belum, itu otomatis akan jadi kepikiran. Tapi terus ternyata lama-lama kayak makin kesini makin, oh yaudahlah, emang belum waktunya” (ON-P2-W1)

b) Self-Development

Self-development is a continuous process undertaken by participants to improve themselves. SA participants emphasize the importance of self-development before starting a relationship.

“Iya, masih menjadi tujuan. Meskipun kita nggak tau ya bakal terjadi kapan, cuman tujuan itu tetep ada, kita pun mungkin ee itu ya memperbaiki diri ya, kayak misal nggak gampang emosian, anger managementnya tertata, nggak gampang impulsive kalaupun sedang emosi, ngerti tentang masak ataupun apa, jadi mempersiapkan aja” (SA-P1-W1).

Discussion

The results of the study show that single career women can build meaning in life through a dynamic and layered process, which includes acceptance, trust, commitment, discovery, and evaluation. These findings reinforce the view that meaning in life is not formed instantly, but

rather through reflection and adaptation to ongoing life experiences. In terms of goals, although single status often causes confusion about the future, all participants still have dreams and hopes that give direction to their lives. The hope of getting married still exists, but it is no longer a top priority, especially after entering their 30s. This change in orientation is in line with Hurlock's developmental perspective and the findings of Shahrak et al. (2021) that the desire to marry can coexist with other goals such as career and independence. In addition, financial goals and consistency in daily activities are also sources of meaning, which support the concept of future orientation as the foundation of meaning in life (Wong, 2012).

Furthermore, self-understanding emerges as an important foundation in the formation of life meaning. Participants demonstrate the ability to recognize their own potential, limitations, and psychological needs. This understanding enables them to make decisions that are more adaptive and aligned with personal values. These findings are in line with Bastaman (2007) and the concept of self-concept clarity (Chen et al., 2024), which emphasizes that clarity of self-understanding contributes to a stronger direction and meaning in life. Meaning in life is also reinforced through the enjoyment and positive emotions derived from work, hobbies, and creative activities. Daily happy experiences, whether through professional contributions or personal activities, become a source of psychological energy that supports a meaningful life. These findings support Wong's (2012) view and research showing that positive emotions and creative activities correlate with life meaning and long-term well-being (Victoriana et al., 2023).

In facing social pressure, participants demonstrated acceptance of evolving conditions through emotional and reflective processes. Acceptance of single status, past experiences, and personal limitations helped participants shift their focus from external demands to self-development. This is in line with the findings of Wu et al. (2024) and Wong (2012), which place acceptance as a basic component in the formation of life meaning. The aspect of commitment was evident through the participants' involvement in positive activities and high desire to learn. Physical activities, reading habits, writing, and a continuous interest in learning were forms of commitment to maintaining well-being and personal growth. These findings support the concept of lifelong learning and Wong's (2012) view that commitment provides direction and perseverance in a meaningful life.

Meaning in life is also found through the process of discovery, both in the form of life lessons and the formation of personal principles. The participants' principles in life serve as guidelines in facing social pressures and making life decisions. This is in line with the meaning-centered approach (Wong, 2012) and Steger's (2017) findings on the importance of value-based living in increasing the presence of meaning. Furthermore, self-evaluation enables participants to make more adaptive changes in their thinking and encourages self-development. The shift in perspective from social demands to personal growth indicates a process of meaning reconstruction (Neimeyer, 2016). These findings confirm that self-actualization and self-development are active strategies used by single career women in constructing meaning in life, as also found by Ciptasari (2022).

Conclusion

This study shows that all participants went through a gradual and dynamic process of searching for and forming meaning in life while they were single. Participants indicated that meaning in life is formed through goals, self-understanding, happiness, acceptance, commitment, discovery, and evaluation, which are continuously carried out over time. All participants had life goals that guided their daily lives and motivated them to achieve personal goals. In facing single life, the five participants tended to indicate that the most important values for them in finding meaning in life were self-acceptance and optimism about the future. The results of the study show that the five participants found meaning in their lives through

exploring various positive things and committing to lifelong learning, namely by continuing to open themselves up to new experiences, developing skills, and organizing themselves to live a more meaningful and purposeful life.

Recommendations

The results of this study are expected to help participants continue to maintain the process of self-reflection and the habit of understanding their needs and life goals. Maintaining positive activities, self-awareness, and accepting life's journey as it is can help maintain the meaning of life that has been formed. Participants can also continue to develop themselves through new learning, exploring new things, and giving themselves space to grow without pressure from social standards regarding single status.

The results of this study can also serve as a reminder that meaning in life can be found through a unique personal process. Single status is not an indicator of a lack of achievement because it does not meet social norms, but rather a part of life's journey that also provides ample space for reflection, self-development, and self-empowerment. Readers are expected to appreciate their own life processes more and not get caught up in limiting social demands or stigma. For society in general, it is important to respect the diverse choices and life journeys of adult women.

Future researchers are advised to examine more deeply the dynamics of meaning in life among single career women in different cultural or social class contexts. In addition, further research could examine the dynamics of meaning reconstruction among single women who have a background of relational trauma or family conflict.

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