

FROM ECONOMIC ASSET TO SELF-ACTUALIZATION PROJECT: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE SHIFTING SYMBOLIC VALUES OF CHILDREN AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE CHILDFREE OPTION

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ABSTRACT

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This study aims to analyze the historical transformation of children's value from economic assets to emotional symbols and self-actualization projects in modern society and its relationship to the emergence of the childfree phenomenon. Using a historical qualitative approach through a library study of classical and contemporary literature, this study traces the changes in children's values within social, economic, and cultural contexts. The results show that the shift in children's values occurs in layers: from a productive function in pre-modern times, to a symbol of affection in the modern era, to the center of emotional projects that require great sacrifice in post-industrial society. The ideology of intensive parenting positions children as emotionally "priceless," yet simultaneously becomes a source of psychological and financial pressure for parents. The childfree phenomenon emerges as a rational reaction to this symbolic burden, marking a renegotiation of the meaning of happiness and success in life outside the framework of the traditional family. This study concludes that childfree is not a form of moral decadence, but rather a reflection of a new rationality that emphasizes psychological well-being, gender equality, and individual autonomy. This research makes an important academic contribution to expanding the study of family sociology, gender studies, and social history by demonstrating the link between the evolution of children's values and the childfree phenomenon. By combining historical and sociological perspectives, this research opens up new space for understanding how changes in economic structures, moral ideologies, and modern technologies shape human reproductive choices in the post-industrial era.

Keywords: Childfree, Child Values, Intensive Parenting, Family History, Reproductive Autonomy, Modernity

1. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of declining global fertility rates and the rise in childfree decisions reflects fundamental shifts in the values, norms, and reproductive behaviors of modern society. In this context, the decision to be childfree cannot be seen simply as a form of individual egoism or a purely economic issue, but rather as a reflection of a historical transformation in the meaning of children within the family. The shift from an orientation toward children as economic assets to emotional and psychological symbols marks a paradigm shift in the modern family, focusing on self-actualization and personal achievement (Ariès, 1962; Hoffman & Hoffman, 1973; Zelizer, 1985). Thus, the choice to be childfree emerges as a social phenomenon reflecting shifts in fundamental values regarding the role of children in contemporary human life.

The central issue addressed in this research is how the evolution of the symbolic value of children throughout family history contributes to the emergence of childfree choices in the modern era. The decision to be childfree does not occur in a vacuum, but is rooted in a long-standing dynamic between the economic, moral, and psychological values of children within the social structure. The purpose of this study is to trace the historical transformation of children's values from pre-modern to contemporary times and to identify how these changes generate symbolic pressures that lead to the rejection of intensive parenting ideology. In other words, this study seeks to connect contemporary social phenomena with the historical roots and value structures that shape them (Hays, 1996; Avison & Furnham, 2015).

Various previous studies have shown that children's values undergo significant metamorphosis as society evolves. Philippe Ariès (1962) asserted in his *Centuries of Childhood* that the concept of childhood is a modern social construct, while Lawrence Stone (1977) described the family's shift from economic ties to affective relationships. Viviana Zelizer (1985) added that children, once economically valuable, have now become emotionally "priceless," creating new moral pressures for parents. Sharon Hays (1996) later introduced the term "intensive parenting," describing the extremely high demands placed on modern parents. Contemporary research also links this pressure to the rise of the childfree movement, which rejects standards of perfect parenting in favor of maintaining autonomy and self-balance (Donath, 2017; Gillespie, 2020).

Over the past decade, various empirical studies have broadened our understanding of the childfree phenomenon in both global and Indonesian contexts. Neal and Watling Neal (2023) found that childfree individuals tend to experience dissatisfaction with family-friendly neighborhoods due to feelings of marginalization within the community. In Indonesia, research by Rahmawati and Pratiwi (2025) showed that the decision to become childfree is influenced by patriarchal cultural norms, social pressure, and economic and reproductive health considerations. A demographic analysis by Nurdin and Yuliani (2024) suggests that the childfree trend has the potential to impact the sustainability of Indonesia's demographic dividend if not balanced by adaptive family policies. Meanwhile, a critical linguistic study by Safitri (2023) examined attitudinal language in online discourse about childfree and found that social media plays a significant role in shaping both stigma and advocacy for this choice. These recent studies confirm that childfree is not simply a lifestyle phenomenon, but rather a complex social phenomenon rooted in

changing child values and power relations in modern society (Neal & Watling Neal, 2023; Rahmawati & Pratiwi, 2025; Nurdin & Yuliani, 2024; Safitri, 2023).

This research is significant because it offers a historical perspective on the childfree phenomenon, which is often misunderstood as a mere lifestyle issue. By situating childfree choices within the historical framework of child values, this research highlights the contradictions of modern culture that place children at the center of life and at the same time as a source of unbearable symbolic burden. This analysis contributes to the study of family history, reproductive sociology, and gender studies by asserting that childfree decisions are rational expressions of individuals in the face of unsustainable ideological pressures of modern parenting. Therefore, this research seeks to uncover the dynamics between child values, individual autonomy, and changing family structures in the postmodern era (Avison & Furnham, 2015; Donath, 2017; Gillespie, 2020).

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a historical qualitative approach with a literature review method to trace the transformation of children's symbolic values from the pre-modern era to the contemporary era and its relationship to the emergence of the childfree phenomenon. The research data consists of secondary sources such as books, journal articles, and relevant scientific publications, ranging from classic works to the latest research. Data were collected through literature searches in various academic databases and analyzed using thematic content analysis to identify patterns of change in children's values and the socio-cultural meanings underlying childfree choices. This approach allows researchers to interpret the childfree phenomenon not simply as an individual choice, but as a historical product of modern family ideology and the pressures of intensive parenting that have developed in post-industrial society.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that the symbolic value of children has undergone historical changes that are not simply linear, but rather accumulative and cumulative: new layers of meaning are layered on top of old functions, fundamentally transforming the child's status within the family from an economic support to an object of emotional value and ultimately to a self-actualization project demanding significant sacrifice. In pre-modern conditions, when the family was the basic unit of production in an agrarian economy, the presence of children was understood primarily in terms of utility: additional labor, protection in old age, and guaranteeing the continuity of the lineage. This historical description is consistent with the classical argument that the concept of "childhood" as a private and protected realm emerged only later in Western social history (Ariès, 1962; Hoffman & Hoffman, 1973).

Subsequent transformations occurred when industrialization, urbanization, and educational reforms altered social relations within the family: children were increasingly removed from productive work and instead shifted to the realms of education, care, and protection. This shift in economic structure coincided with the emergence of middle-class

families that deified affective values; love and care became the new moral capital. Philosophers of education (Locke, Rousseau) and studies of family history marked this moment as a shift to affective individualism, where the family became a space of intimacy and the child became the focus of moral value creation. The impact: the loss of children's economic utility did not diminish their significance, but rather shifted them to a more demanding symbolic realm (Stone, 1977; Zelizer, 1985).

This shift revealed a paradox: as children became "emotionally priceless," the financial burden and moral expectations of parenting actually increased—expenditures on education, healthcare, and extracurricular activities became indicators of the family's moral capacity and social status. In other words, sentiments of affection served as justification for greater economic commitment to children; this is sometimes called the moral economy of parenthood. This phenomenon has structural consequences: modern families experience inflation in the cost of children while demanding a high level of attention (Zelizer, 1985).

Entering the 20th century and peaking in the post-war era, the fields of developmental psychology and pediatrics reinforced the discourse that childhood is a crucial period; the narrative of "the future being shaped early" fueled highly scaled and technical parenting demands. Sharon Hays (1996) labeled this binding modern parenting pattern intensive parenting—an ideology that demands an extreme investment of time, attention, and resources from parents. When parental expertise becomes the norm, every parental behavior is evaluated as "right/wrong" according to child development standards popularized by professional authorities. This further reinforces the symbolic burden on parents (Hays, 1996).

Intensive parenting practices create two direct consequences relevant to this study: (1) persistent psychological distress for parents (including the phenomenon of parental burnout), and (2) the commodification of parenting—where educational services, therapies, and childcare activities become an expensive market. A recent systematic review of parental burnout and its associated factors demonstrated a strong correlation between intensive parenting demands and decreased parental well-being (Ren et al., 2024). This pressure is not only about material costs, but also about the loss of personal time, career obstacles (especially for women), and the erosion of non-parental identity space.

In this context, the decision to remain childless appears as a rational and contextual reaction, not merely a hedonistic or individualistic expression. Childfree can be read as a form of value renegotiation: when the emotional and economic investment in children becomes disproportionate to the perceived benefits, individuals reassess their life priorities. This aligns with the Value of Children (VOC) framework: when utilitarian values decline and psychological/monetary costs rise sharply, the choice not to invest (i.e., not having children) becomes logical (Hoffman & Hoffman, 1973; Avison & Furnham, 2015).

Contemporary empirical studies enrich this interpretation with data and narratives of experience. Neal and Watling Neal (2023), for example, show that childfree individuals often feel alienated in environments designed for families with children (neighborhoods, public services), but they also form alternative communities that affirm various forms of non-reproductive well-being (Neal & Watling Neal, 2023). Other social studies have highlighted the diverse motivations behind childfree: environmental concerns, economic

uncertainty, career considerations, mental health issues, and a rejection of traditional gender norms—all of which indicate that childfree is multifactorial and not homogeneous.

In Indonesia, research and public discourse in recent years have demonstrated a distinctive dynamic: childfree discourse is often politicized within religious and patriarchal norms, but also gains new legitimacy through public figures and online communities. Case studies of childfree influencer discourse reveal polarized opinions: from stigma and condemnation to empathy and support from specific groups. Online discourse has become a battleground for the meaning of reproductive freedom and the definition of modern women in Indonesia (Barakah, Aziz, & Putri, 2024; Pramesti, Sari, & Utomo, 2024).

Qualitative analysis of Indonesian data also highlights structural factors driving childfree choices: the burden of urban living costs, the uncertainty of contract work, the lack of gender-supportive family policies (e.g., equal leave), and social pressure on mothers to be the primary caregivers. In their research, Rahmawati & Pratiwi (2025) positioned the childfree phenomenon as a form of negotiation with a patriarchal culture that restricts women's autonomy, thus making this choice also contain gender political implications (Rahmawati & Pratiwi, 2025).

Furthermore, the demographic consequences of increasing childfree choices need to be viewed with caution: several demographic studies warn that the rising proportion of people who do not want to have children could impact the national age structure and productivity if the trend spreads without compensatory policies. Nurdin & Yuliani (2024), for example, highlight the potential impact on Indonesia's demographic dividend if fertility rates continue to decline among the productive generation (Nurdin & Yuliani, 2024). However, it is important to note that the relationship between personal preferences and birth rates is also bound by policy, economic, and cultural factors—not simply individual choices.

Gender analysis is key to understanding why childfree is often more problematic for women: disproportionate parenting expectations, higher career risks due to maternity leave and caregiving roles, and moral policies that judge women by their reproductive status make the decision to remain childless a socially risky one. Therefore, for many women, childfree is also a strategy to maintain agency and careers, not simply a lifestyle choice. Recent feminist scholarship emphasizes that assessing this phenomenon without considering gender obscures its underlying dimensions of inequality (Donath, 2017; Gillespie, 2020).

The role of social media in reproducing and transforming childfree discourse cannot be underestimated. Online platforms provide a space for alternative narratives, solidarity, and sources of information that facilitate the construction of positive childfree identities. However, these same platforms also serve as arenas for attacks, shaming, and the moralizing of those who choose to remain childless. Netnographies of vocal public accounts demonstrate this dynamic: support and resistance interact, shaping moral contestation in the digital public sphere (Barakah et al., 2024; Pramesti et al., 2024).

One emerging aspect of recent research is the relationship between environmental consciousness and childfree choices. Several studies report that concerns about climate change and natural resources are reasons for some individuals to remain childless,

viewing reproduction not only as a personal matter but also as an ecological responsibility (Greenwood et al., 2022; Martínez & Singh, 2023). For them, choosing to be childfree also represents an ethical statement regarding the environmental burden and future ecological legacy.

Furthermore, reproductive technology and reproductive health have become important parts of the childfree discourse. Access to modern contraception, fertility treatments, and reproductive health education have made individual choices more feasible and informed, while also raising awareness that the inability to have children or the decision to postpone them may be related to medical factors, not just cultural or economic ones. Studies in Australia and Canada have shown that women who delay pregnancy for health or career reasons express a temporary or permanent childfree orientation after evaluating medical and social risks (Lee et al., 2022; Carter & Wong, 2023).

The interrelationship between urbanization, internal migration, and lifestyle also emerges as important variables. In large Indonesian cities such as Jakarta, Surabaya, Medan, and Bandung, high living costs, limited housing space, transportation, and social pressures make the decision to have children more materially and psychologically burdensome. Children are perceived as an additional burden (space, education, healthcare, and childcare costs) in an already busy life with work and high mobility. Local field research in North Sumatra and Central Java suggests that accumulated stress from long working hours and the dual responsibilities of work and family lead some individuals to choose childfree as a way to maintain their quality of life (Setiawan & Purnama, 2024; Wulandari, 2023).

Theoretically, these results strengthen the argument that reproductive choices should be interpreted as the result of an interaction between the historical structure of children's values (value history), current economic conditions, gender norms, access to technology and healthcare, and public discourse. The historical-sociological approach used in this research (combining Value of Children theory, family history, and reproductive identity studies) helps explain the continuity of children's function and the transformation of their meaning, and how the childfree phenomenon emerges as a culmination of this spectrum of change.

From a policy perspective, these findings suggest that efforts to increase birth rates through financial incentives alone are likely inadequate. To mitigate the reproductive exodus, policies must address its symbolic and structural roots: reducing the burden of caregiving (through quality daycare services, gender-equal parental leave, and flexible working hours), improving social security pensions so that children are no longer “old age insurance,” expanding access to reproductive health care, and addressing gender inequality in the labor market.

Finally, conceptually, this research demonstrates that childfree is not simply a personal phenomenon, but rather a manifestation of a major shift in social values in post-industrial society. Where having children was once considered an essential part of family and moral identity, it is now a choice fraught with multiple risk variables: economic, psychological, gender, and environmental. Reading childfree as a manifestation of modernity means recognizing that societal value priorities are shifting—from biological continuity and lineage to quality of life, identity freedom, and ethical responsibility toward oneself and the environment.

4. CONCLUSION

This research concludes that the shift in the symbolic value of children is a long and complex historical process, shifting from economic functions to emotional, moral, and psychological values in modern society. In pre-modern times, children were viewed as productive assets with high utilitarian value in supporting the family economy, particularly in agrarian systems that relied on human labor. However, industrialization, urbanization, and changes in the education system shifted the child's role to the center of affection and moral concern in modern families. Children, once possessing economic value, became symbols of purity and love, giving rise to what is known as the moral economy of parenthood—where economic and emotional responsibility for children becomes the measure of family morality. This shift marked the birth of the affective family ideology, which later evolved into an intensive parenting model that demands boundless dedication from parents.

In post-industrial society, the idealization of children reaches its extreme with the emergence of the ideology of intensive parenting. Children are no longer simply recipients of affection, but the central project in parents' lives, whose success is an indicator of moral and social success. As a result, a modern contradiction emerges: the higher the psychological value of children, the greater the symbolic, economic, and emotional burdens parents must bear. This pressure has given rise to the childfree phenomenon, a conscious choice not to have children as a form of resistance to parenting norms that restrict individual freedom and well-being. This phenomenon is not the result of shallow individualism, but rather a critical reflection of value structures that place parenting as the center of life's meaning and the measure of one's morality. In this context, childfree is a new form of rationality that affirms the individual's right to determine the meaning of happiness and success in life outside of the traditional reproductive framework.

The childfree phenomenon in Indonesia exhibits unique dynamics due to its interaction with patriarchal culture, religious norms, and persistent social pressures. On the one hand, the decision not to have children is often stigmatized as a form of moral deviance or a threat to family values. However, on the other hand, a growing number of individuals, particularly urban middle-class women, are embracing childfree as an existential choice to maintain independence, careers, and psychological balance. Public discourse on social media demonstrates a shift in societal perspectives: from moral condemnation to a more rational acceptance of reproductive freedom. This phenomenon shows that childfree in Indonesia is not just a lifestyle trend, but a social phenomenon that indicates a profound change in the structure of values and gender relations in society.

Thus, the shift in the value of children from an economic asset to a project of self-actualization reflects the evolution of modern family morality, characterized by ambivalence: between affection and pressure, between sacrifice and the search for self-meaning. When the emotional and financial demands of parenting reach saturation point, some individuals choose a new path by rejecting the ideology of parentalism that limits

personal freedom. The decision to become childfree emerges as a form of renegotiation of life values amid socioeconomic and cultural pressures, and also symbolizes the emergence of a new rationality oriented toward mental well-being and individual autonomy. Historically, this phenomenon demonstrates that family and reproduction are no longer the sole centers of morality, but rather part of a conscious choice that can be negotiated according to the social and psychological conditions of modern society.

Academically, this research makes an important contribution to the development of family studies, gender studies, and modern sociology by demonstrating that the value of children is not a fixed entity, but rather a social construction that is constantly changing according to the economic, cultural, and moral dynamics of society. This article expands theoretical understanding by linking the history of child values to contemporary social phenomena such as intensive parenting and childfree, and placing both within a mutually continuous historical context. Furthermore, this research enriches the study of family sociology in Indonesia by offering a new perspective on how individuals negotiate identity, happiness, and autonomy amidst structural pressures and social expectations. Ultimately, this research confirms that the choice to remain childless is not a sign of decadence, but rather a reflection of social maturity and an ethical awareness of human freedom to determine one's own life direction.

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