

# Single Women's Potency to Achieve Psychological Well-being

Nanik<sup>1,2</sup>, Wiwin Hendriani<sup>1</sup>, and Mareyke M. W. Tairas<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia*

<sup>2</sup>*Faculty of Psychology, University of Surabaya, Surabaya, Indonesia*

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**Abstract:** This research aims to explore the personal and social context of single women that can contribute to psychological well-being. It is necessary as the percentage of single women has been increasing and previous research showed that single women can achieve happiness in life, despite negative stigma from environment. There is lack of explanation on the process and protective factors, especially in Indonesia. Data collected from forty-one Indonesian single women aged 25-70 years old help us to understand the psychological well-being accomplishment of single women. Respondent were gathered through purposive sampling. An open-ended questionnaire was used as measurement tool. Respondents were tasked to answer about the reason to stay single, emotional experience, thoughts about their life, social judgement toward the status, how they cope with problems, effort to gain a purpose and meaningful life and the reason to be happy. Data gathered were analyzed by a descriptive content analysis. Results showed that personal and social context of single women are potential to support them to achieve psychological well-being.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Research on single women has been developed since decades ago. Before 1960, there's a stigma attributed to single women. A research dated back to 1950 showed that women become single for negative reasons, i.e. hate of men or feeling ugly (Gove, 1972).

Lewis & Moon (1997) explain that in the 60s, though generally women did not claim herself to be a feminist, they were more assertive, competent and standing on their own decision whether to be married or not. In the early 80s, Nadelson & Notman (1981) concluded that perception of wife as a lower role was the main theme for women to become single. Paterson's (1982) study on single women viewed singleness as a form of self-denial or boycott. Later on, feminist literatures implied a lot of women chose to stay single (Hicks & Anderson, 1989; Nadelson, 1989; Nadelson & Notman, 1981; Walters, et al, 1998). During 90s, a new study honors the success of single women to live a fulfilled life. At the same decade, there was an exploration study on single adult life as a distinct life stage.

There are several considerations for a woman to stay single, begin since early adulthood (30 - 40 years old) until late adulthood or above 65 years old

(Nanik & Hendriani, 2016). Some are related to physical reasons such as perception of less attractive self or has become mature (old age), others are more psychological. Perceived weakness in personality or others, feel that a man is not suitable, being a working woman, the need of achievement and self-actualization, priority on career and autonomy, a desire to be appreciated more by self-accomplishment and not of husband's status, lose trust on marriage or marriage consequences are some of their considerations. On the other hand, there are thoughts that more related to culture and chronological system around them. Meet a man at wrong time, postpone marriage plan for too long time because of other priority, differences in self-character compared to other women at the same era (more dominance and autonomy) or gender role values back then when women were not equal to men in family (Lewis & Moon, 1997; Situmorang, 2007; Gaetano, 2009; Ibrahim, 2009; Wang & Abbott, 2013; Winterstein & Rimon, 2014; and Nanik, 2015).

A latest research in India (Beri & Beri, 2013) shows that single women above 28 years old belief that marriage is not necessary and it doesn't bring any good for women. They also agree that by not marry, they can take care their parents better. In their opinion, single women can watch themselves

without marriage. They believe single life makes them more flexible and independent in terms of home, job, financial, personal time, output value and happiness. Respondents of the research become single by their own choice, because their need of identity and autonomy, high ambition and life dedication for appreciation.

Despite the growing population and several studies has shown happiness in women living a single life (Lucas, 2005 as cited in DePaulo & Morris, 2006 and Hertel, et al, 2007), single women still faced challenges in their daily life. There are prejudice, stereotypes and discrimination related to single people. Their happiness is doubtful and part of societies still viewed them negatively. Howe (2012) said people who are committed to a sexual relationship have been taken for granted that they will achieve a more meaningful and happy life compared to others that are not. Society negatively evaluated or even discriminate individuals who were not in line or not fulfilled marriage ambition. This belief is called singlism.

Previous research proved that negative perceptions are still existed among people living in urban cities in Indonesia nowadays (Nanik, Hendriani & Tairas, 2018). Two main psychological well-being related perceptions are lonely and insecure. These attributes were mainly perceived by single women respondents in their thirty to forty. Other negative perceptions are worry some, old hag, weird, cold, material girl and hard to sell. In general, people (particularly those who are married) views singlism as a social problem. They can't accept an idea that a single woman can be happy and satisfied in her life. On the contrary, the research also showed some positive perceptions toward single women such as independent, successful and enjoying life (happy), despite stigma or negative perceptions attributed to them.

Their ability to gain happiness or positive experience is against common perception and need further explanation. Therefore, a preliminary research was conducted on personal and social context of single women to project their potential to achieve eudaimonic (psychological well-being) in the recent time. Theoretical framework used in this research is psychological well-being as proposed by Ryff (2013).

Ryff (2013) stated that psychological well-being is a multidimensional construct made from attitudes and life values. Ryff's model consist of six psychological dimension, which are (1) autonomy: a feeling from self-determination, independency, behavior regulation and ability to counteract social

pressure; (2) environmental mastery: one's ability to choose and create their environment, appreciate their own needs and interest and effective usage of opportunities around; (3) personal growth: personal potential development through growing as an individual and openness to new experiences; (4) positive relation with others showed by warm, satisfying and trust in a relationship, a strong empathy ability, love and intimacy; (5) life purpose: to find meaning in personal effort and challenges; (6) self-acceptance: have a positive attitude toward oneself and aware of one's weaknesses.

In short, eudaimonic is an integration of happiness and meaningful. In more broaden meaning, it is the fully functioning of a person through the six dimensions stated above which resulted as happiness plus meaningfulness or asset of wellness in the form of self-actualization and vitality (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Factors that affect psychological well-being are personality (Ryan & Deci, 2001 & Kokko et al., 2013); developmental age (Ryff & Keyes, 1995); self-esteem (Kim & McKenry, 2002); grateful (Wood, et al., 2008); religiosity (Maltby, et al, 1999; Ismail & Desmukj, 2012; Tanasya, et al.s, 2015); social support (Winefield, et al., 1992 & Licy, 2015), social economy status and level of education (Kim & McKenry, 2002); loneliness (Cecen & Cenkseven, 2007); works and other life engagements (Kim & McKenry, 2002; Ryff, 2013).

Aim of the research is to explore personal and social context of single women that could be protective factor to achieve psychological well-being. The result will provide explanation on single women ability to enjoy and live a successful life. Personal context elaborated here are desire for marriage, reasons and consideration to become single, emotional experience during single life, loneliness experience, boredom, evaluation of their happiness in life, problem solving in daily life, respondent effort to achieve life goals and make a meaningful life. On the other side, social context discussed here are support system given by environment and appraisal on the single status. Another objective is to see whether that singlism ideological belief still applied in single women community in Indonesia nowadays.

## 2 METHOD

Respondents were single women (N=41), age between 25-70 years old, with educational

background no less than high school and living in several cities of Indonesia.

The criteria that must be met are never married, currently not involved in any romantic/intimate relationship, do not cohabiting, do not possess same-sex sexual orientation and do not carry a religion celibacy commitment in a seminary or monastery (not a nun or sister). Those criteria are stipulated so that psychological well-being in single life is experienced in truly single condition, and not affected by dating or romantic relationship or religious process. Through purposive sampling technique, they represent various culture background and coming from considerably small cities like Blora, Sidoarjo, Malang, to large and metropolitan cities like Denpasar, Yogyakarta, Surabaya and Jakarta.

Data were gathered using questionnaire constructed by the authors based on previous extensive literature review and preliminary interview to several single women that met above criteria. Questionnaire covers information such as identity and demographical data (sex, age, education level, occupation, religion and race) and questions regarding personal and social context. It consisted of close and open-ended questions. The themes covered on questionnaire were drawn from literature reviews, as explained above, while options on close-ended questions were based on answers from preliminary interview. Sample of close-ended question is "What are your reason to remain single until now?", and the options are (a) it's my choice; (b) haven't met appropriate person; (c) interested in same-sex relationship and (d) other, please explain. All the close-ended questions also allow respondent to give other answer not stated on the options. Sample of open-ended question is "What troubles have you faced in relation to your single status?"

For most questions (except identity and demographical data), respondents were allowed to give more than one answer, depends on their condition and what they're going through. Questionnaire didn't required respondent to scale their answer because it aim only to gather as broad information as possible about their personal and social context. After construction, the questionnaire went through an expert review, where the topic's variation and questionnaire's systematic order were criticized.

Data analysis was conducted using quantitative descriptive content analysis. Quantitative descriptive content analysis aimed to discover the characteristics of respondents' content and answers on personal and social context of single women, and also to draw a

conclusion or meaning from the characteristics of the answers (Eriyanto, 2011). The process started with authors compile all the answers from respondents per question. It then scrutinized and grouped based on similar themes appeared from each question. After all answers were grouped, the results were sorted based on the frequency distribution for each group of answer. The frequency of same or similar answer then divided by total number of respondents (N=41) to generate a percentage of respond. Since respondents can opt for more than one answer, then the total percentage of answer per question will exceed 100%. The percentage data showed a comparison for each answer on the same question.

The main framework used to describe data in this research is Ryff's multidimensional construct of psychological well-being, although authors were also open to any themes or typical answers from respondents that might differ from the theory as this is a preliminary research.

### 3 RESULT

Before answering the main research questions, respondent's demographical background information such as age, level of education, religion, occupation and culture/race will be described first.

Half of the respondent were at 25 - 40 years old (8 respondents are below 30, 13 respondents are 31-40 years old), while the other half were spread across age group of 41-50, 51-60, and over 61 years old. Detailed information about respondent's age are detailed in the table below.

Table 1: Respondent's age group.

Age	Frequency (Percentage)
Below 30 years old	8 (19.51%)
31-40 years old	13 (31.71%)
41-50 years old	7 (17.07%)
51-60 years old	5 (12.20%)
Above 61 years old	8 (19.51%)

Levels of education were between high school, diploma, bachelor, master and doctorate degree with more that 50% of them holds bachelor degree. In terms of religion, although all religions in Indonesia were represented, majority of the respondents were Christian (41%), Catholic (27%) and Islam (24%). As for work status, 17 respondents are private company employee, 7 are lecturer, 6 are entrepreneur and the other are varied from medical doctor, teacher, to not yet working (fresh graduate). Regarding cultural background, most of them were

raised in Chinese-Indonesian culture (56%), Javanese (19.5%), Balinese (4.88%) and other native cultures of Indonesia.

### 3.1 Personal Context

Personal context refers to single woman herself, including their reason to stay single, how they view the status and their desire for marriage. Personal context data are expected to give some explanation on six dimensions of psychological well-being, which are autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationship with others, life purpose and self-acceptance.

#### 3.1.1 Reasons for Being Single

60.98 percent respondents said that they become single because they haven't met a suitable partner or future husband to be and they still want to get married. Of this 60.98%, eleven women (44%) are at age 31-40 years old and eight women (32%) are below 30 years old. Only 11 of 41 respondents (26.83%) stated that become single is her life choice. Most of them are in late adulthood (over 61 years old). The others trust that they become single because God's destiny, they are comfort with their own self or because of economical factor that force them to focus on work in order to support their families.

#### 3.1.2 Considerations

Need for autonomy and freedom are the main considerations to stay single (35.41%). Other consideration is work or education demands (18.75%). These themes were mainly considered by respondents that are at 31 - 40 years old.

Table 2: Considerations on living as a single.

Considerations	Frequency (percentage)
Autonomy & freedom	17 (35.41%)
Work & education	9 (18.75%)
No prospective man	7 (14.58%)
Family factors	3 (6.25%)
Religious calling	2 (4.16%)
Trust in God's plan	1 (2.08%)
Relationship trauma	1 (2.08%)
Physical imperfection	1 (2.08%)
Emotional condition	1 (2.08%)

### 3.1.3 Attitude toward Single Life

Although they are single right now, 14 respondents (34.15%) still have goal to build a family someday. 26.83% of respondent's goal is to help and care for others. Twelve respondents (29.26%) hope to live a healthy and happy life.

To achieve a meaningful life, half of the respondents (53%) said that they have to build a good relationship and share goodness to others. 24.39% stated that they involved in various activity/work and 18.51% try to be closer to God. Other said that way to achieve a meaningful life is to live the life just as what it is and try to be happy. There were two respondents stated establish a serious relationship (with man) as a way to gain a meaningful life, therefore, they try to look for a suitable man.

When they are having trouble, majority of them will try to discuss with others (56%). This answer was seen on every respondent age group. Some will think and face it alone (34.15%), while the other will ask for other's help or pray. None choose to avoid the trouble.

### 3.1.4 Emotional Experience

Majority of respondents still have positive emotional experience though they are single. 75% of them enjoy their single life and only 12% who feels wary or lonely. All respondents (8 persons) in above 61 years old age group stated that they enjoy their life. This answer also appears in other age group, from below 30 (7 persons), 31-40 years old (11 persons), 41-50 and 51-60 years old (2 persons each).

Specifically for happiness, 92.68% respondents said that they are happy. Freedom was the main reason for their happiness (35.9%), family comes second (23%), followed by ability to be grateful (20.51%) and other reasons such as presence of friends, ability to enjoy life process, autonomy and trust in God's plan.

Most of the respondents does not feels boredom because they are involved in activities (42.86%), are able to be thankful and live their own life (15.29%), feels that life offer many variations (15.29%) and because they can enjoy it (15.29%). In general, they also do not feel lonely (85.37%) because they have families and friends stand along them. Involvements in activities also prevent them to feel lonely (47.22%). One respondent whose age above 61 said that she is not feels boredom because she has God.



### 3.2 Social Context

Social context will mainly talk about support system from the environment and their appraisal on single status. Findings on social context are the main contributor to positive relationship with others dimension of psychological well-being. Nevertheless, it's expected to contribute to other dimensions as well. Details of social context described here were families, friends, work life and other social participation, including religious activities, as well as social judgment they perceived from environment.

Most respondents (70.73%) stay with their families. Eight (28.57%) are below 30s respondents, eleven (39.28%) are from 31-40 years old group, 6 respondents who are 41-50 years old, and two respondents from each age group of 51-60 and above 61 years old. Only 9 respondents (21.95%) are living alone while the other 2 are living with a maid and staying in a boarding house.

#### 3.2.1 Family

Family hold an important part in single's life. 75.61% acknowledge that family helps them during times of trouble. Respondents across all age group stated this source of help. This data goes along with previous data stated above that most of the respondents is living with their family.

#### 3.2.2 Friends

Friends also show significant contribution to single women. They are single women's second source of help in times of trouble (46.34%), besides family and God (2.44%). More than 90% of respondents have friends. Friendship is seen as a sharing opportunity (57.89%), support source (44.74%) and become a significant part in women's life (31.58%).

#### 3.2.3 Social Judgement toward Single

There are positive and negative opinions from single women's social environment.

Acceptance and support were perceived by 43.9% of the respondents. Five out of 8 respondents in above-61 age group stated this. But only 1 person (22.22%) of respondent within age 31-40 years old perceived this. On the other side, 21.95% still received critics or negative judgement from social environment until now. It was mainly perceived by respondent in age before 50, with the breakdown as follows: 4 below 30 years old respondents, 4 within 31-40 years old and 1 respondent from 41-50 group

of age. Other perceptions from social environment are rejection at the beginning then change to acceptance (4.88%), apathetic (12.2%) and no specific judgement (12.2%).

## 4 DISCUSSIONS

In general, single women respondents in this research showed the capabilities to achieve psychological well-being. All six dimensions of Ryff's psychological well-being are reflected in women's personal context. These six dimensions can become their protective factors in facing daily life.

Autonomy was reflected in the need for freedom that has been stated as their main reason to become single. It is an indication that they are self-determined and able to regulate their thinking or feeling from internal. A large number of respondents (75.6%) who can enjoy single life showed self-acceptance where they can feel positive about their life, be grateful and possess positive attitude toward themselves. An understanding that become single is her own choice also indicate self-acceptance, whether good or bad qualities of their life.

An indication of psychological well-being in positive relation with others dimensions is their low feeling of loneliness. It is rooted from the presence of family, friends and various activities. Majority of single women consider friendship as a strong social support for them (Winefield, et. al, 1992 & Licy, 2015). Environmental mastery dimensions also reflected in respondents' statement that they almost never feel boredom because they are involved in activities or organizations, living a various life, grateful and able to life their life as it is. Furthermore, it also shows self-acceptance as a dimension of well-being.

Dimension of purpose in life and personal growth can be developed through respondent's life goals. Personal consideration of career or education demand shows that single women prioritize their job. Job or work life could give a direction for women toward personal growth. Goals in life indicate that one has a sense of directedness and objectives for living. Even more, effort shown to achieve their goals such as managing their life better, become a better person, live happy and healthy and improve themselves shows that they see improvement in self and behavior over time and development oriented. These are the characteristics of personal growth. Ryff (2013) stated that religious participation is related to higher level of purpose and growth. In addition to that, goals that are related to

other people, such as to care and help others also reflect their positive relation to others.

Happiness in life was perceived by more than 90 percent of the respondents. This feeling of happiness comes from various cause such as ability to live free, autonomy, existence of family and friends, an act of gratitude, enjoying life process and trust in God's plan. Their reasons indicated multiple dimensions of well-being, from autonomy, environmental mastery, positive relation with others and self-acceptance.

Moreover, respondents also direct their life to be more meaningful by sharing goodness to others, involved in various work or activities, being closer to God and develop a positive relationship with their social environment. This is related to concept of eudaimonia (Linley & Joseph, 2004) which refer to a good condition, doing good things in order to achieve virtue. An aim toward more meaningful life shows that they are experiencing all six dimensions of psychological well-being in life.

In daily life, they have several coping strategies when they encounter problems. First, they usually try to think and face it alone. Given that most of them are educated, with strong orientation in education and career, they have the capabilities to formulate possible way out and evaluate it. This will develop their autonomy. Other strategies such as discuss with others, asking other for help or pray. These various coping strategies are possible outcome from psychological well-being dimensions which are autonomy and positive relation to others, through strong social support.

Social context of single women also shows that they have a considerably positive social environment to support them to achieve psychological well-being. Firstly, social judgement from environment that tends to be more positive, supportive and welcome or might show resistance at the beginning but finally can accept them. Other potency is their living style because most of them are not living alone, although they are not married. By living with other people, mostly with family, they never really live alone. Indonesian culture of collectivism is reflected here as it's common in Indonesia for adult who has not married yet to live with his/her parents. They even expected to do so until they get married (Situmorang, 2007). Therefore, we can say that single women here are not individualistic. This condition helps build their capacity to develop good relationship with others.

They also have friends and family who will help them in times of trouble. Most of their social relations are positive, as they can views friendship as a sharing opportunity and support source. This social

support has a significant impact to psychological well-being. As they accept themselves as a single, combination of personal characters and support from social environment makes single women shows better self-esteem and willing to show them self as they are. In return, it will help them to master their environment easier and develop positive relationship with others.

Additionally, there are other factors that can contribute to single women's psychological well-being in this research. Those are level of education, work status and their living environment. Respondents level of education are considered moderate to high with most of them possess a bachelor degree. Higher level of education opens chance to gain better career options. Better career will contribute to better socioeconomic status and therefore better well-being.

Respondents also show ability to gain a stable individual income through their work activities. A regular income could be an indicator to a better socioeconomic status. A research by Srimathi & Kumar (2010) as cited in Ryff (2013), showed that women with higher socioeconomic strata possess better health and well-being, compared to those with lower socioeconomic strata. By living in cities and at this time being, single woman is living in a more open society; hence they do not get extra pressure from it. Data from previous research also support these findings as social support (Winefield, et al., 1992 & Licy, 2015), social economy status and level of education (Kim & McKenry, 2002), work and other life engagement are proven to affect psychological well-being (Kim & McKenry, 2002; Ryff, 2013). Specifically for those in mid-life (respondent in age group 41-50 years old and above), work and educational experience found to be the strongest predictor of their well-being (Ryff, 2013).

This descriptive research result shows that single women possess several protective factors that could support them to achieve happiness, to live a fulfilled life and adapt as well as married people. It's quite contrary to public perception or ideologies accepted by society in general. Personal context that can contribute to single women psychological well-being in terms of happiness are freedom, autonomy, engaged in work or various activities, have family, friends and God where they can lean on to. An attitude of life that is grateful, live life as it is, enjoying life process and trust in God's plan also can contribute to it. Personal context contribute to meaningful life are life goals to care and help others, sharing goodness, involvement in various activities

and work, intention of personal growth in terms of become a better person, getting closer to God and create a positive relationship with social environment. On the other hand, social context that can affect single women's psychological well-being both for happiness and meaningful life is social environment acceptance toward their single status and social support from families and friends.

Some of the limitations of this research are the composition of respondents that has not really represent balanced in each demographical data such as chronological age, level of education, work status, cultural background and religion.

As this is a descriptive and preliminary research, findings that it is possible for single women to achieve psychological well-being needs to be further explored. Possible areas of development are explanatory research on psychological well-being as well as several factors that contribute to it measured by valid instruments to gain a number that has significant meaning. Apart from that, this research can also be followed-up by qualitative explanatory research to discover more on causes and ways of single women to achieve psychological well-being.

Other point that will be interesting to see is differences in social culture where single women live in relation to loneliness. This research was done in Indonesia which has strong collectivism culture and religious views. Some ways of living are accepted and encouraged here, such as stay at home with parents, siblings or other family member if someone has not married yet. As long as parents still alive, children (mature and adult) that has not married, stay with them. This is different with condition in Western countries, where children are expected to move from parent's house once they are mature enough. So, the emotional experience might be different there, especially the loneliness.

Further on loneliness, this research focused mainly on social loneliness and has not elaborate more in emotional loneliness. It is also a possible area of further research.

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