

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE MEANING OF PIETY IN BUILDING MARITAL SATISFACTION IN CHILDLESS COUPLES

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Abstract

A successful marriage is primarily defined by the presence of children in Indonesia's pronatalist culture. As a result, Muslim married couples who have been childless for over five years frequently face social, psychological, and spiritual pressures that may undermine their marital satisfaction. Despite these challenges, some couples are able to maintain positive and fulfilling marital relationships. This study aimed to examine the meaning of *taqwa* (God-consciousness) in fostering marital satisfaction among Muslim couples who had been married for more than five years and had not had children. A qualitative descriptive phenomenological design was employed. The study involved six participants comprising three Muslim married couples, namely AZ-RD, YN-RR, and JDL-DY, who were selected through purposive sampling based on predetermined inclusion criteria. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, member checking, source triangulation involving three significant others, and an audit trail to establish the trustworthiness, dependability, and confirmability of the study. Data were analyzed using descriptive phenomenological procedures, including epoche (bracketing), horizontalization, the formulation of meaning units, thematic clustering, textural description, structural description, and synthesis of the essence of the phenomenon. The findings indicated that *taqwa* was understood as a life orientation through which childlessness was perceived as part of Allah's divine decree containing purpose and wisdom. *Taqwa* was manifested through patience, gratitude, *tawakkul* (trust in Allah), forgiveness, compassionate communication, equitable role sharing, and a shared commitment to viewing marriage as an act of worship. The essence of the phenomenon demonstrated that *taqwa* transformed the social pressures associated with childlessness into a process of spiritual growth that strengthened marital satisfaction through emotional and spiritual intimacy, mutual commitment, acceptance of Allah's divine decree, and shared meaning-making in marital life.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Marriage provides couples with psychological support, companionship, intimacy, and meaning, while requiring continuous adjustment to changing roles, goals, financial circumstances, and decisions about parenthood (Dush et al., 2013; Fincham & Beach, 2019; Fowers et al., 2021). One challenge that may affect marital life is prolonged childlessness. In Indonesia's pronatalist context, couples without children may experience social expectations, stigma, intrusive questions, and pressure from family and the wider community, particularly as the duration of marriage increases (Saikia et al., 2024). Such experiences may contribute to anxiety, helplessness, feelings of inadequacy, marital conflict, and communication difficulties (Angelica & Himawan, 2022; Hamzehgardeshi et al., 2023; Mushtaq & Ghafoor, 2024). Nevertheless, childlessness does not necessarily diminish marital satisfaction. Some couples maintain commitment and marital well-being through communication, mutual respect, family support, and religious resources (Kristanti & Soetjiningsih, 2016; Lioe, 2023).

For Muslim couples, marital well-being is also embedded within spiritual and moral values. Islamic teachings conceptualize marriage through *sakinah*, *mawaddah*, and *rahmah*, emphasizing the couple's relationship with Allah as well as their relationship with one another. Within Islamic psychology, *taqwa* refers to God-consciousness that guides emotional regulation, moral conduct, self-control, and interpersonal behavior (Badri, 2018). Unlike religiosity, which generally concerns religious involvement, or religious coping, which concerns the use of religion to manage stress, *taqwa* represents an integrated orientation through which individuals interpret life circumstances and regulate their responses in accordance with divine values.

Although previous research has examined childlessness in relation to psychological distress, marital satisfaction, religiosity, spirituality, and religious coping, limited research has explored the lived meaning of *taqwa* within the marital relationship, particularly among Muslim couples experiencing prolonged childlessness. It remains insufficiently understood how *taqwa* shapes couples' interpretation of childlessness, emotional regulation, interpersonal conduct, and maintenance of marital commitment and satisfaction.

Therefore, this study employs a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore the lived experience and meaning of *taqwa* among Muslim couples who have been married for more than five years and do not yet have children. The study specifically seeks to understand how *taqwa* is experienced and embodied in everyday marital life and how it contributes to the construction and maintenance of marital satisfaction amid prolonged childlessness.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a transcendental phenomenological design as developed by Moustakas (1994) to explore the lived experiences of Muslim married couples who had been married for more than five years and did not yet have children, with particular attention to how they experienced and interpreted *taqwa* in relation to marital satisfaction. The choice of Moustakas's transcendental phenomenology was based on the purpose of the study, which was to describe the essential meaning of the participant's lived experiences while systematically attending to the researchers' preconceptions during the inquiry. In this approach, the participant's descriptions constitute the primary source for understanding the phenomenon, while the researcher seeks to approach those descriptions through *epoché*, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of the experience's essence (Moustakas, 1994).

The methodological position of this study was therefore consistently aligned with Moustakas's transcendental phenomenology rather than Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method. Accordingly, the term descriptive phenomenology in this study refers to the descriptive orientation of the inquiry, whereas the specific methodological framework used for data analysis was Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenology. This distinction is important because the study adopted Moustakas's procedures of *epoché*, horizontalization, reduction of significant statements into meaning units, thematic clustering, textural and structural description, and synthesis of the essence of the phenomenon. The approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand how participants themselves experienced and gave meaning to *taqwa* within their marital lives rather than to test a predetermined causal relationship between religiosity and marital satisfaction. The methodological focus was consequently placed on participant's conscious experiences and the meanings they attributed to those experiences.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) Muslim married couples; (2) couples who had been married for more than five years; and (3) couples who did not yet have children. The study involved six primary participants comprising three married couples: AZ-RD, YN-RR, and JDL-DY. Three significant others were additionally involved as sources of triangulation. The couples shared relatively homogeneous characteristics in accordance with the research focus; however, their experiences were not treated as interchangeable. Each participant was therefore analyzed as an individual experiential subject before the experiences of spouses were synthesized at the couple level. This structure was consistent with the phenomenological emphasis on individual lived experience while also recognizing marriage as a relational context. The research documents separate analyses for AZ and RD, YN and RR, and JDL and DY, followed by a synthesis of each couple and a subsequent cross-case analysis across the three couples.

The study involved six primary participants comprising three Muslim married couples: AZ-RD, YN-RR, and JDL-DY. All couples had been married for more than five years and had not yet had children.

Although they shared the same defining characteristics, their lived experiences of childlessness and their ways of constructing marital satisfaction differed considerably. The phenomenological analysis therefore revealed both a shared experiential structure and case-specific patterns of meaning. This distinction is important because the absence of children did not produce a uniform psychological or relational response across participants. Instead, the meaning of childlessness was shaped by the couple's history of attempting to conceive, emotional experiences, communication patterns, relational support, responses to social expectations, and religious meaning-making. The research similarly identifies AZ-RD as emphasizing togetherness in fertility efforts, YN-RR as emphasizing gratitude, acceptance, and *tawakkul*, and JDL-DY as emphasizing mutual understanding, emotional support, reflection, and acceptance.

Couple	Prominent experiential pattern	Direction of meaning-making
AZ-RD	Intensive efforts to have children, togetherness, communication, and mutual strengthening	From prolonged uncertainty and emotional fatigue toward shared endurance, acceptance, and relational closeness
YN-RR	Gratitude, acceptance of Allah's decree, <i>tawakkul</i> , and balanced effort	From continued hope toward acceptance, gratitude, and spiritual tranquility
JDL-DY	Mutual understanding, emotional support, self-reflection, and acceptance	From waiting and uncertainty toward relational maturity, reflection, and spiritual acceptance

Data collection was considered sufficient when subsequent interviews, member checking, and triangulation no longer generated substantially new themes relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. The final dataset therefore consisted of six primary participants and three significant others whose accounts contributed to the validation and contextualization of the primary participant's experiences.

Data were collected through individual semi-structured phenomenological interviews lasting approximately 60–90 minutes, conducted either face-to-face or online. The interview guide focused on marital satisfaction and the meaning of *taqwa*. The marital satisfaction dimensions were adapted from Fowers and Olson (1989, in Fowers & Olson, 1993), while the *taqwa* guide was based on Kuning (2018), as used by Hidayat et al. (2024). The guide served as a flexible framework, allowing participants to describe their experiences freely, with follow-up questions used to clarify meanings and contexts.

Epoché was implemented throughout data collection and analysis by identifying, suspending, and continuously monitoring the researcher's preconceptions regarding childlessness, marital satisfaction, religiosity, and *taqwa*. Participant's verbatim accounts and significant statements served as the primary basis for interpretation. This process was supported by an audit trail documenting transcription, coding, theme development, member checking, triangulation, and final synthesis.

Data were analyzed using Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenological procedures. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and repeatedly reviewed, followed by horizontalization, identification of significant statements, phenomenological reduction, meaning-unit development, and thematic clustering. Each participant was first analyzed individually, followed by synthesis at the couple level and cross-case comparison across the three couples. Finally, textural and structural descriptions were integrated into a composite essence describing the meaning of *taqwa* in relation to marital satisfaction.

Trustworthiness was established through member checking, final member checking, triangulation with three significant others (OF, Wafi, and BML), and an audit trail. Ethical principles of informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, participant rights, and data security were observed. Ethical approval was obtained from the International Open University Board of Research and Publications (IOUBRP), Ethics Approval No. ETHIC 191/08-26, dated August 19, 2026.

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

These differences should not be interpreted as differences in the level of religiosity or *taqwa*. Rather, they represent differences in how the same phenomenon was lived and interpreted. For example, AZ-RD experienced the waiting period through a relatively intensive history of fertility efforts, including repeated insemination and in-vitro fertilization, whereas YN-RR emphasized the coexistence of

continued hope and acceptance of outcomes beyond personal control. JDL–DY reported comparatively limited fertility intervention and instead described the experience more strongly in terms of patience, calmness, mutual support, and openness to jointly considering future efforts.

This variation provides an important qualification to previous research that predominantly associates childlessness or infertility with psychological distress, marital strain, and social pressure. The present findings do not contradict the existence of these pressures; rather, they demonstrate that the presence of a stressor does not determine a single lived meaning. In the present cases, childlessness functioned as a context within which couples actively constructed meaning through their relationship with one another and through their relationship with Allah SWT.

Table 1. Phenomenological Themes, Meaning Units, and Illustrative Quotations

Theme	Subtheme	Meaning unit	Illustrative quotation
Spousal acceptance and emotional support	Shared endurance	Childlessness is experienced as a shared marital journey rather than an individual burden	AZ: “I feel that I would not have been able to go through all of this alone without my husband. We learned to strengthen each other when one of us felt tired or lost motivation.”
Communication and cooperation	Open discussion and joint decision-making	Problems and fertility decisions are discussed together rather than through blame	RD: “I always try to discuss every issue with my wife openly. I prefer to listen first to what she is feeling before responding. Every decision regarding fertility programs is discussed together.”
Conflict resolution and resilience	Emotional regulation and forgiveness	Couples regulate emotional reactions before resuming discussion and prioritize restoration of the relationship	RR: “When my emotions are more stable, I think about the solution.”
Meaning of childlessness	Acceptance without blaming the spouse	The absence of children is interpreted as part of Allah’s decree rather than as a spouse’s fault	RR: “I do not get angry with my wife. A child is a provision entrusted by Allah. If we have not been given one, perhaps it is not yet what Allah has entrusted to us.”
Hope and acceptance	Effort alongside surrender	Hope for children remains while the outcome is entrusted to Allah	YN: “I see both as having to go together. I still have a strong hope of having a child, and I do not want to lose that hope. At the same time, I am learning to accept that the final outcome is beyond my control. I try my best through medical efforts and prayer, and then I entrust the result to Allah.”
Gratitude and <i>tawakkul</i>	Reorientation toward existing blessings	Gratitude shifts attention from the absence of children toward the marriage and other blessings already experienced	YN: “What makes me most grateful is the fact that until today we are still walking together and our relationship is good... I still have health, work, a good spouse, a supportive family, and the ability to keep trying.”
Spiritual meaning-making	Trust in Allah’s wisdom	Religious belief provides an interpretive framework for uncertainty	JDL: “We have tried as much as we can, and we entrust the result to Allah. I believe that Allah has a better plan for us.”
Marital satisfaction	Growing together in faith	Satisfaction is experienced as maintaining affection, commitment, and togetherness rather than obtaining every desired outcome	DY: “I see marital satisfaction not as having all our wishes fulfilled, but as being able to live together with faith, patience, gratitude, and mutual support.”

The table is derived from the participant-level and cross-case phenomenological material in the research. The original analysis documents individual significant statements, meaning units, theme clusters, and subsequent couple and cross-case synthesis.

Relational Acceptance, Communication, and Conflict Regulation

Marital satisfaction was experienced through interconnected relational processes involving spousal acceptance, emotional support, open communication, cooperation, and constructive conflict regulation. Rather than being experienced uniformly as a source of marital distress, childlessness was described by participants as a shared condition that could strengthen mutual understanding and emotional closeness. AZ stated, "All of this journey has actually made our relationship closer than before." This account indicates that emotional support transformed childlessness from an individual burden into a shared marital experience. In this context, acceptance of the spouse and the shared condition became important foundations for maintaining relational cohesion, emotional closeness, and commitment, consistent with dyadic adjustment perspectives on marital satisfaction (Graham & Christiansen, 2022).

Open communication further supported this relational adjustment by enabling spouses to express emotions, understand each other's perspectives, and make joint decisions. RR explained, "I always try to discuss every issue with my wife openly. I prefer to listen first to what she is feeling before responding." This statement demonstrates that communication functioned not merely as an exchange of information but also as a means of emotional recognition, cooperation, and shared decision-making. Consistent with Fowers and Olson's framework, communication constitutes an important dimension of marital satisfaction because it enables spouses to share emotional and cognitive experiences and address relational difficulties.

The same relational process was evident in participant's approaches to conflict. Marital satisfaction was not defined by the absence of disagreement but by the ability to regulate emotions and restore relational harmony. AZ reflected on her earlier marital experience: "I was also in a position where I wanted to maintain my own opinion and felt that I should be understood first." Her reflection illustrates a process of relational development in which the initial tendency to prioritize personal viewpoints gradually shifted toward emotional regulation and discussion after emotions had subsided. Conflict resolution therefore involved more than solving a particular disagreement; it included self-control, openness, deliberation, forgiveness, and efforts to preserve the relationship. Across participants, these processes demonstrate that marital satisfaction was sustained through the capacity to accept one another, communicate openly, provide emotional support, cooperate, and manage conflict constructively.

Spiritual Meaning-Making: Patience, Gratitude, Tawakkul, and Reframing Childlessness

Participant's experiences of childlessness were also shaped through an interconnected process of spiritual meaning-making, in which *sabr* (patience), gratitude, *ikhtiar* (effort), and *tawakkul* (reliance on Allah) provided a framework for responding to prolonged uncertainty. These values did not eliminate the desire to have children or diminish participant's efforts to pursue fertility. Rather, they enabled participants to maintain hope while acknowledging that the final outcome was beyond their control. YN stated, "I still have a strong hope of having a child... However, at the same time, I am also learning to accept that the final outcome is beyond my control." This illustrates the simultaneous experience of *ikhtiar* and *tawakkul*: participants continued to make efforts and sustain hope while entrusting the ultimate outcome to Allah.

This spiritual meaning-making also influenced how participants responded to social expectations surrounding parenthood. Participants did not consistently allow external judgments or expectations to determine the meaning of their marriages. RR stated, "I do not want to make those comments an excessive burden. My focus is on living our married life well and remaining grateful for what we have at present." Rather than allowing social evaluation to become the primary basis for assessing marital fulfillment, RR emphasized gratitude, marital well-being, and the quality of shared life. This suggests a movement from externally defined expectations toward an internally grounded understanding of marriage.

The finding is consistent with Ansarinia et al. (2023), who highlight the significance of intrinsic religious orientation as an internally grounded source of psychological and emotional stability. In the present study, this orientation was reflected in participant's ability to sustain marital well-being and gratitude without positioning parenthood as the sole criterion of marital fulfillment. Similarly, Bukhari et al. (2023) relate *taqwa* to patience, gratitude, *tawakkul*, affectionate communication, and marital harmony. Thus, *sabr*, gratitude, and *tawakkul* were not experienced as isolated religious values but as interconnected resources through which participants interpreted childlessness, maintained hope, accepted uncertainty, and sustained their marital commitment.

Phenomenological Synthesis of Marital Satisfaction

The findings should not be interpreted as evidence that taqwa causally produces marital satisfaction. Rather, the phenomenological synthesis shows that participants experienced taqwa as part of the meaning structure through which childlessness, marital challenges, and relational experiences became understandable and manageable. The three couples nevertheless followed different pathways: AZ-RD emphasized togetherness throughout an intensive fertility journey; YN-RR emphasized the coexistence of hope, acceptance, gratitude, and tawakkul; and JDL-DY emphasized mutual understanding, reflection, patience, and acceptance. Thus, marital satisfaction was experienced less as the fulfillment of having children and more as the capacity to maintain commitment, affection, mutual support, and spiritual meaning amid uncertainty. This interpretation is consistent with the research final synthesis, which conceptualizes satisfaction as an ongoing process of commitment, cooperation, and shared growth through taqwa.

Overall, the findings indicate that childlessness did not determine a uniform marital outcome. Instead, its meaning was shaped by communication, spousal acceptance, emotional support, conflict regulation, and religious meaning-making. Taqwa emerged as an integrated God-conscious orientation through which participant's maintained hope while accepting uncertainty, continued ikhtiar while practicing tawakkul, regulated emotions, forgave one another, and sustained marital commitment. This interpretation extends previous research by showing how an Islamic psychospiritual orientation is lived through everyday marital practices rather than merely demonstrating an association between religiosity and marital satisfaction.

4. CONCLUSION

This study explored how Muslim married couples who had been married for more than five years and did not yet have children experienced and interpreted taqwa in relation to marital satisfaction. The phenomenological synthesis indicates that childlessness was experienced not merely as the absence of children, but as a prolonged condition involving hope, effort, uncertainty, acceptance, and spiritual reflection within the marital relationship. Taqwa emerged as a God-conscious orientation through which participants interpreted their circumstances and enacted marital responsibilities. It was expressed through acceptance, tawakkul, gratitude, emotional regulation, forgiveness, mutual responsibility, and commitment to the marriage.

Theoretically, this study extends research on marital satisfaction, childlessness, and religion by highlighting the lived meaning of taqwa as a specifically Islamic psychospiritual construct. Rather than demonstrating a causal relationship between taqwa and marital satisfaction, the findings show how participants experienced these dimensions as interconnected through their everyday meaning-making. This perspective extends previous approaches that have primarily examined religion through religiosity or religious coping.

Practically, the findings suggest that psychological and marital interventions for Muslim couples experiencing childlessness may benefit from attending to couples' own spiritual meaning-making alongside emotional distress and relationship processes. Values such as patience, gratitude, tawakkul, forgiveness, and responsibility may be incorporated when they are meaningful to the couple, while avoiding assumptions that religious interpretations are experienced similarly by all couples. This may support culturally responsive psychological and family interventions.

Several limitations should be considered. The study involved only six participants from three Muslim married couples, limiting the breadth and statistical generalizability of the findings. The relatively homogeneous sample also restricts transferability to couples with different cultural, socioeconomic, marital, or religious backgrounds. In addition, the findings represent participant's subjective meanings at a particular point in time, which may change as their marital, reproductive, and spiritual circumstances develop. Although member checking, triangulation, and an audit trail strengthened the credibility of the findings, the study focused primarily on taqwa and marital satisfaction and did not examine other contextual influences in depth, such as extended-family support, religious communities, or reproductive-health services. Future research could therefore involve more diverse populations and complementary methodological approaches.

Overall, the essence of the phenomenon lies not in childlessness itself, but in how couples make meaning of their marriage within this circumstance. For the participants, taqwa provided a God-conscious framework through which uncertainty was interpreted and marital life was sustained through commitment, mutual support, acceptance, gratitude, affection, and tawakkul. The study therefore

contributes a culturally grounded phenomenological understanding of how an Islamic psychospiritual construct becomes interconnected with marital satisfaction among Muslim couples who have not yet had children.

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