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Factors affecting childbearing decision making among Iranian couples: a qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

Objective. Childbearing decision-making is a complex process involving many social, economic, political, and individual factors. This study aimed to identify effective factors on the childbearing intention among Iranian couples.

Patients and Methods. This qualitative study was conducted on 15 Iranian couples using a conventional content analysis during 2017-2018. The data was collected using in-depth, semi-structured, individual interviews and analyzed in five steps using the Graneheim and Lundman (2004) approach.

Results. The data were categorized into four main sets, including couple capability (financial stability, housing condition, and graduation), parenting attitudes (paternal and maternal feelings, emotional support, social support, and age role), couple interactions (satisfactory relationships, collaboration, and cooperation), and childbearing experiences (friends and relatives childbearing experiences, and first child experiences).

Conclusions. Factors affecting the couple's childbearing decision were multi-dimension in this social context. These key factors may contribute policymakers in developing beneficial policies in each community to facilitate childbearing among couples.

INTRODUCTION

Today, contraceptive use has changed the prospect of parenthood to a personal choice [1]. Planning to have a child has an important role in the future life of the mother, family, and society [2]. Over the past three decades, the fertility rate has declined in all areas of the world. This rate has been reduced in the recent decades in Iran so that it was significantly

reduced from 5.5 to 1.9 during 1978-2015 [3-5]. Traditionally, Iranian couples shortly give birth to their first child after the marriage. Voluntary childlessness is rare and not a socially acceptable decision [6]. Similar to other human phenomena, childbearing is involved with many aspects such as social, economic, cultural norms, individual beliefs, religion, and partner suitability [7, 8]. Fertility intentions in Iran are formed vastly through tradition

and gender roles, in addition to religious sentiments [3].

Couples are the most significant context to investigate fertility decision-making [9, 10]. Factors that build fertility intentions can explain variations in fertility changes cross-nationally and over time [11]. So, the question of couples' childbearing intentions has continually remained on the research agenda [10]. Although the data collected from Iranian females and males have been published [12, 13], no literature about both members of a couple has been yet reported. Most studies evaluated the determinants of fertility outcomes, such as the number of children and birth timing. Rijken and Knijn [14] clarified that a combination of quantitative and qualitative investigations allows achieving a more comprehensive view of the concept. The childbearing intention can better explain qualitative researches because naturally it is a deep and long process [7]. Therefore, studying the effective parameters is essential for the childbearing intention in each population with different socio-economic and cultural situations. Accordingly, a qualitative study was designed to focus on the affecting factors of childbearing decision-making among young Iranian couples.

PATIENTS AND METHODS

Participants and study design

In this qualitative study, the childbearing intention among young Iranian couples was examined using a content analysis approach. These individuals were referred to three health centers in Tehran (Iran) from January 2017 to February 2018. The participants were selected among the women referring to health care services for family planning consult through a purposive sampling method. We approached these couples with a phone call to ask for participation until having enough samples. In total, 37 respondents were reached by phone. Of those, 40% participated in our study. The response rate was negatively influenced by the fact that both partners had to be willing to participate (women were more often willing than men) and to be available at the same time. Participants included 8 childless couples, 3 couples with one child, 3 couples with two children, and 1 couple with three children. The present study was approved by the Human Ethics Committee of Shahrood University of Medical Sciences (Semnan, Iran) with an ethical code of IR.SHMU.

REC.1396.119. Before doing interviews, the couples were informed about the study objectives and methods, the voluntariness of participation, and the data confidentiality. All participants signed the consent form before beginning the interviews. The interview guide and COREQ.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

There were three inclusion criteria for all couples as follows:

1. at least one year after their marriage,
2. wives < 45 years old, and
3. living together at least for one year and with no infertility history.

Accordingly, nine infertile couples were initially excluded from the study.

DATA COLLECTION

A maximum variation purposive sampling method was used to select interview participants (**Table 1**). Official permission was taken from the Department of Health. The data were collected based on a face-to-face, semi-structured interview with both partners. All the interviews were arranged in a private room at the health centers and done by one of the researchers. The interviews started with general descriptive questions such as "How have not you ever had a child?" – decisions about parenthood included the intentions solely on biologic children created through natural conception – for childless couples and "How did you have a child?" for couples who had a child or children. Then, probing questions (such as "please explain more") were asked to collect more details. Each interview lasted between 50 and 90 minutes, while it was recorded using a voice recorder. During the interviews, observations and field notes were implemented and non-verbal data such as tone and gestures were recorded. The interviews were transcribed into the original language (Persian) and analyzed using the content analysis and further translated back into English. The interviews with the participants continued until the occurrence of data saturation. New data entering the study did not alter the available classification. Also, the creation of a new class data saturation in this study was obtained in the 11th interview. Nevertheless, four more interviews were conducted to ensure the reliability of data collection. Besides, no interviews needed to be repeated.

Table 1. The characteristic profile of participants.

No. [couple]	Age/yrs ^a	Marriage length [yrs]	Child No.	Education ^a	Job ^a	Income (million IRR) ^a	Housing type	Housing area (m ²)	Insurance
1	M: 35 F: 35	5	0	M: postgraduate F: Diploma	M: Businessman F: Housewife	M: 2.5	Living with parents	70	-
2	M: 30 F: 25	3	0	M: postgraduate F: Postgraduate	M: Businessman F: Student	M: 7.5	Rented	80	Basal
3	M: 27 F: 23	3	0	M: postgraduate F: postgraduate	M: Employee F: Housewife	M: 3.5	Rented	60	Basal
4	M: 25 F: 23	3	0	M: Diploma Postgraduate	M: Student F: Student	M: 4	Owned by parents	104	Basal & Complementary
5	M: 30 F: 25	3	0	M: postgraduate F: postgraduate	M: Businessman F: Housewife	M: 12	Rented	120	Basal
6	M: 27 F: 22	2	0	M: postgraduate Postgraduate	M: Employee F: Employee	M: 6 - F: 4	Rented	65	Basal & Complementary
7	M: 25 F: 20	2	0	M: Diploma F: Diploma	M: Employee F: Employee	M: 2 - F: 2	Rented	55	Basal & Complementary
8	M: 24 F: 23	3	0	M: postgraduate F: postgraduate	M: Businessman F: Housewife	M: 4	Owned	70	Basal & Complementary
9	M: 36 F: 33	3	1	M: Diploma F: Diploma	M: Employee F: Housewife	M: 3.5	Rented	60	Basal & Complementary
10	M: 26 F: 19	2	1	M: Intermediate F: Diploma	M: Businessman F: Housewife	M: 2.5	Rented	50	Basal
11	M: 41 F: 32	5	2	M: Diploma F: Intermediate	M: Businessman F: Housewife	M: 5	Owned	70	Basal & Complementary
12	M: 31 F: 30	7	1	M: Diploma F: postgraduate	M: Businessman F: Employee	M: 5 - F: 3	Owned	76	Basal & Complementary
13	M: 33 F: 29	4	2	M: Diploma F: postgraduate	M: Businessman F: Housewife	M: 6	Owned	90	Basal
14	M: 34 F: 22	5	2	M: Intermediate F: Intermediate	M: Employee F: Housewife	M: 2.5	Rented	50	Basal
15	M: 34 F: 33	8	3	M: postgraduate F: postgraduate	M: Employee F: Employee	M: 5 - F: 6.5	Owned	125	Basal & Complementary

^aM: Male - F: Female.

Interviewing partners together stimulates recall and clarification among participants.

Data analysis

A qualitative content analysis was conducted using the conventional approach. The data assessment was performed using the analysis method provided by Graneheim and Lundman [15] based on the following steps: 1) transcribing the interviews verbatim and reading several times to get a general sense of the material, 2) dividing the text into meaning units, which were significant phrases in the text, 3) abstracting the condensed meaning units and outlining using codes, 4) grouping codes into sub-categories and categories with comparisons conducted according to similarities and differences, and 5) re-organizing and merging into sub-themes to overarching themes as the expression of the latent content of the text participant.

The trustworthiness in this study was assessed by four criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability [16]. The data credibility was assured according to the feedback obtained from the couples and the increased number of interviews for some participants. The participants were selected based on the maximum variation and various experiences in terms of the study subject to increase the data transferability to other settings and groups. Some participants and researchers examined the data confirmability and dependability through peer check, peer debriefing, and review of transcripts.

RESULTS

The participants included 15 couples with an age range of 24-41 years for husbands and 19-35 years for wives (**Table 1**). The present study focused on the factors affecting childbearing intention among Iranian couples. In the end, 1420 initial codes were

extracted. Because many of the resulting codes were similar, the same codes were merged. At last, 53 final codes were classified into four main categories: couple capability, parenting attitudes, couple interactions, and childbearing experiences (Table 2).

These categories will be displayed as follows:

- couple capability: the most common reasons mentioned by couples in this category were a stable situation with having the completed education, stable employment, home together and financial security, and secured a job with a good income. Some general comments in the category of couple capability are given in the continuation of this part:
 - one woman concluded as follows (couple with two children): "If you decide to have a baby, you should be able to afford it. All steps of pregnancy, childbirth, child-rearing, and child education are costly. That is right, money is important. Her husband continued: "You would be ashamed if you cannot afford the necessary supplies for the child. You know, we prefer to have our child when we are in a better economic condition. You know: I do not want to let him/her suffer in the life". Most couples believed that housing is an important component because the bulk of the revenue is spent on it.
 - One woman mentioned (childless couple): "A baby needs a proper house. Now, we are living in a one-bedroom apartment. It does not have enough space for a baby".
 - One man also pointed out (couple with one child): "The time was right. My wife was graduated and found her job in a health center. So, we could think about having a kid.

When our life became quiet, our desire for a child developed".

- parenting attitudes: parenting attitudes and emotions towards childbearing will strongly affect childbearing intentions. There was a powerful natural sense of being a mother or a father among the interviewees. Some couples' statements relevant to parenting attitudes are mentioned in the continuation:
 - one woman referred (couple with one child): "No sense is comparable to the sense of being a mother. Baby is the sweet of life, the pleasure of becoming a mother, to give love to a child, and receive love from it". The desire to give love to a child and raise one's child and see it grow up was also an important motivation for our respondents. It seems that couples' attitudes towards childbearing aspects such as paternal and maternal feelings, a continuation of the family line, and social duty can notably motivate fertility intentions among them.
 - A 29-year-old woman mentioned (couple with two children): "The existence of a child makes life purposeful and enhances a sense of responsibility. I love being a mom, even with all of its trials. The ability to help shape a young mind and allow her to blossom is miraculous". Her husband continued: "You know when your kid calls you mam or dad; it gives you a sense of love and self-confidence. I was always looking for my life's purposes. I found it when I had my children".
 - A 36-year old man with one child indicated (couple with two children): "When you become a father, everyone respects you. You be-

Table 2. The process of developing the main categories..

Codes	Sub-categories	Main categories
Secured Job, Adequate income	Financial stability	Couple capacity
Suitable house	Housing condition	
Graduating	Education	
The pleasure of becoming a mother or a father, Giving love to a child	Paternal, and maternal feelings	Parenting Attitudes
Fear of loneliness, Child as a blessing, Increasing the self-confidence, Getting the respect of others	Emotional support	
Continuation of the family line, Familial ties such as aunts and uncles	Social duty	Couple Interactions
Being an energetic father or mother, Being a young father or mother	Age role	
Understanding, Trust, Love, Forgiveness, Empathy	Satisfactory relationships	
The partner involvement in domestic labor and childcare	Collaboration and cooperation	Childbearing Experiences
Siblings and friends' childbirth as a trigger, or their difficulty in childbirth and child-rearing as a deterrent	Friends & relatives childbearing experiences	
Complicated pregnancy, Experiencing a difficult baby	First child experience	

come more than a man in the eyes of society; you are a father to your kids.” His wife continued: “You need someone to care about you when you get older. I mean that children do not let you feel alone in the future. I hate loneliness”. Nowadays, parents do not expect their children to support them financially in elderly days. They want their emotional support.

- A 32-year-old woman said (couple with three children): “When I was a child, all the family gathered together on the weekends. We visited our aunts, uncles, and their children. But, I think the next generations have no opportunity to have their aunts and uncles”.
- For some couples, a continuation of the family line and having relatives are important components. Some participants mentioned the biological clock. They wanted to be young enough to play with their children. Being an energetic father or mother lets them enjoy parenting. A 22-year-old woman mentioned (couple with 1 child): “It was great for me to earlier have my child. A young mother can rear their children better. She has more energy to play with children. Young parents can communicate with their children better”.
- In contrast, childbirth in the early years of marriage sounds like a threat for couples to spend their time together. Losing their freedom, leisure time, and traveling opportunities would lead them to delay childbearing. A woman declared that (couple with one child): “When I approached 30, time really started pressing so that my desire to have a child grows gradually.” Her husband continued: “We did not want to have a child at our marriage onset because we preferred to spend more time with each other and go out together”.
- In some couples, this attitude during the time has changed to develop the need to have children. A woman who has been living with her husband for five years mentioned (couple with one child): “First, I did not want to have a kid. However, we both felt boring after passing the time. We wanted our own child”. Hence, the child seems to be a part of the concept of personal development and continuing life.
- couple interactions: most of the couples believed that the satisfaction of couples’ relationships affected their childbearing intention. Satisfactory relationships between couples provide a suitable pre-condition for child-rearing:
 - one woman declared (couple with one child): “We experienced it ourselves. We have some disagreements. We should solve them before deciding to have a child”.
 - Couples also mentioned that a sense of understanding, trust, love, forgiveness, and empathy in life is necessary before childbearing. A 22-year-old woman described (couple with one child): “If the entire house task is on one’s shoulder, it will be tedious and frustrating. When our son was born, my husband always was beside us. He helped me with house tasks and childcare”.
- childbearing experience: the effect of births among siblings and friends has two aspects, including 1) it sometimes makes people feel like having children and 2) for some people, it was even the reason not to have children. One commonly mentioned reason to have a child was that our friends had children. Therefore, the birth of a child or announcing a pregnancy can act as a trigger:
 - a 30-year-old woman (couple with two children) declared that: “I really wished to have a daughter when we with our friends went out and saw their sweet darling daughter, Nazy”.
 - In contrast, some couples were disappointed with the childbearing experiments of their relatives and friends. A 26-year-old childless man (couple with one child) affirmed that: “It seemed really difficult for me when I looked at my brothers and sisters who already had children”.
 - Some couples to have children were discouraged when they got familiar with couples’ problems concerning pregnancy, childbirth, and child-rearing. A 33-year-old woman said (couple with one child): “My first pregnancy was complicated. I was hospitalized for two months because of preterm labor. I had difficulty with breastfeeding when my daughter was born. I really could not handle the situation. I cannot convince myself to have a second child when I remember those days”.
 - In contrast with these problematic experiences, a woman who was the mother of three kids tells her story (couple with three children): “I had three normal vaginal deliveries. I remember after the third one, my husband and two sons were beside me. My sons en-

joyed playing with the newborn baby. It was really interesting for them. At that time, our family had a good time”.

DISCUSSION

In our social context, effective factors in the childbearing decision are multi-dimension. This qualitative study explains four main categories of couple capability, parenting attitudes, couple interactions, and childbearing experiences. The main sub-categories of parenting attitudes were financial stability, housing condition, and graduation. Parenting attitudes included paternal and maternal feelings, emotional support, social support, and age role. The couple's interactions included satisfactory relationships, collaboration, and cooperation, while childbearing experiences consisted of friends' and relatives' childbearing experiences, and the first childbearing experiences.

According to previous studies, it was evident that childbirth depends on financing [17-19]. Although job security plays a meaningful role in childbearing decision making [15, 20, 21], Fiori *et al.* [23] revealed that job instability is less affected by short-term childbearing intentions. Modena and Sabatini [22] also revealed that low family income led to postponing fertility intentions among Italian men and women. This discrepancy may be attributed to the cultural and regional differences governing various parts of the world or even a country. In the present study, the most common affecting factors mentioned by couples were a stable situation, including having a completed education degree, having stable employment with enough income, and having an independent house.

Couples who live in single-family houses or homeowners are more likely to have their first child sooner [23]. Our findings also revealed the role of housing conditions in fertility intentions. Our analyses showed that parenting attitudes and emotions strongly affect childbearing intentions. Couples' attitudes to childbearing such as paternal and maternal feelings, social supports in the youth and aging years, and a continuation of the family line can motivate fertility intentions among Iranian couples. Billari *et al.* [24] showed that the positive childbearing motivation in terms of the pleasure of pregnancy, birth and infancy, traditional parenthood, the fulfillment of child-rearing, and feeling needed to have a child were strongly associated with child-

bearing intentions. The childbearing intention can be potentially limited by negative motivations such as pregnancy and childbirth difficulties, parenthood stress, and childcare worries [24]. It was mentioned that the emotional comfort in the elderly years encourages Korean stay-at-home mothers to have their second childbirth [25]. Maryse *et al.* [26] declared that childbearing has less frequently been considered a “duty towards society” and increasingly served as personal fulfillment.

We realized the importance of partnership quality and satisfaction in childbearing decision-making. Several studies reported that partnership stability could affect the realization of childbearing intentions [22, 23, 27]. The association of partnership quality with the childbearing intention was earlier distinguished [14, 28]. Rijken and Thomson [28] found that the perception of relationship quality could affect the progression rate to the first and second childbirth. Some couples in our study, especially those who had children, implied the cooperative role in housework and childcare was meaningful in childbearing decision-making. Similar findings were reported by other researchers [18, 29].

In our study, friends and family members played a vital role in making the couple leap to this decision. Bühler *et al.* [30] believed that childless couples are usually influenced by network partners and their own families. But they mentioned that the intensity of this factor was dependent on the individuals' characteristics and their ability to communicate for transferring experiences and information. Both positive and negative experiences of friends and relatives with childbirth in this study could affect childbearing intentions among young couples. Negative fertility experiences led them to limit their fertility intentions. Adair [31] and Chasiotis [32] declared that more frequent exposure to children in adulthood increased fertility desires and positive attitudes towards babies.

A principal component in childbearing decision-making is the networking interaction within family and friends [17]. There was an association between experiences concerning the first child's birth and child-rearing and the second and higher-level child's intentions. Childbirth is a significant transition involving physical and emotional changes in the mothers [33, 34]. This experience is considered a complex, multidimensional, and subjective one [34]. Women with difficulty in conceiving or delivering intend to have fewer children [35].

CONCLUSIONS

This study showed that fertility intention was dependent on several key elements. Factors affecting childbearing intention are categorized into four main categories: couple capability, parenting attitudes, couple interactions, and childbearing experiences. As childlessness is not a norm in Iran, under the pressure of society, they will experience a birth almost as often as the same. First-birth intentions are closely related to the wish of establishing a family and are more influenced by normative pressure than the economic situation. The possibility for an additional child is associated with couples' desires. It is a multidisciplinary project and involved financial, social, cultural, physiologic, and psychological aspects.

Limitation

Similar to all qualitative studies, the findings cannot be generalized. Since the maximum variation sampling method was used to select the participants, interviewing partners together may cause spouses to be less likely to reveal their viewpoints. However, it can highly stimulate recall and clarification among participants.

COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Authors contribution

M.H., L.K., A.M.N., A.K., M.S.: Conceptualization and design. M.H., L.K.: Data acquisition. M.H., M.S., A.M.N., A.K., L.K.: Data analysis and interpretation. M.H., L.K.: Writing – original draft. The final version of this manuscript has been read and approved by all authors and it is not under consideration for publication elsewhere.

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Study registration

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Disclosure of interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

Ethical approval

The present study was approved by the Human Ethics Committee of Shahroud University of Medical Sciences (Semnan, Iran) with an ethical code of IR.SHMU.REC.1396.119.

Informed consent

Written informed consent was obtained from the participants for publication of this research.

Data sharing

All the data of this case series are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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