Anxiety in Pregnant Women During the Covid-19 Pandemic: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Aprezo Pardodi Maba iD
Universitas Ma'arif Lampung, Indonesia
✉ aprezopm@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: The prevalence of anxiety experienced by pregnant women during the Covid-19 pandemic could not be overlooked. This study aims to discover the various causes of anxiety experienced by pregnant women during the pandemic. After explaining the research objectives and obtaining informed consent, author interviewed seven pregnant women. All informant were married, majority of them were working, and all husbands of the interviewees also had permanent jobs. The data analyzed using an interpretive phenomenological approach. The study results show that four main themes cause anxiety in pregnant women amid a pandemic, namely immediate changes, health concerns, access to health services, and social isolation. This study highlights the prevalence of anxiety among pregnant women during covid-19 pandemic. It also emphasizes the importance of taking into consideration factors such as immediate changes, health concerns, access to health care, and social isolation while implementing intervention to reduce this issue. Furthermore, policymakers should prioritize these four main themes in arranging covid-19 mitigation guidelines or protocol specifically for pregnant women.

INTRODUCTION

Getting pregnant during the covid-19 pandemic may only happen once in a lifetime. Pregnant women are overshadowed by the covid-19 infection which at any time can cause prolonged anxiety, stress, and depression. Especially since women are reported to experience higher levels of anxiety and stress during disease outbreaks (Wang et al., 2020).

Pregnancy is a pleasant time, but the situation will be pretty different if ones are pregnant during a pandemic. Pregnant women are one of the population groups that are vulnerable and need more attention amid the covid-19 pandemic, especially in the last trimester when there are fears of vertical infection from mother to baby (Chen et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020). Pregnant women are reported to be vulnerable to develop anxiety and stress (Heron et al., 2004; Mudra et al., 2020; Teixeira et al., 2009).

Several research results show that pregnant women who experience high levels of anxiety can harm their health and that of the baby they are carrying (Ding et al., 2014; Shahhosseini et al., 2015) or anxiety and depression after childbirth (Dennis et al., 2017; Glover, 2014). Furthermore, Mirzadeh & Khedmat (2020) said that anxiety, depression, and high levels of stress can cause miscarriage, premature birth, low birth weight, and fetal death.

Anxiety and stress for pregnant women since the covid-19 pandemic has shown an increasing trend (Corbett et al., 2020; Lebel et al., 2020). Their main concerns are their elderly family members, their children, and the baby they are carrying. In contrary, they pay little attention to their own health,

although in general they experience increased anxiety (Corbett et al., 2020). Additionally, Lebel et al. (2020) were estimating the long-term impact that will occur on the child after birth.

Rationale of the Study

Studies on the anxiety of pregnant women during the covid-19 pandemic are minimal, especially those using an interpretive phenomenology approach. This is because most health services focus on the impact of covid-19 infection at the time of birth. Not many pay attention to psychological aspects such as stress and anxiety (Barišić, 2020). Therefore, some researchers suggest that they provide space for other investigator to take part in studies in this field (Barišić, 2020; Corbett et al., 2020; Fakari & Simbar, 2020). Although several studies and surveys have been conducted to see how the psychological state of pregnant women and the types of interventions that can help them cope (Corbett et al., 2020; Feduniw et al., 2020; Lebel et al., 2020) current study is necessary to be conducted to help provide and enrich the literatures on the anxiety of pregnant women amid the covid-19 pandemic and become a step for further research.

Objective

The author aims to investigate the origins of anxiety experienced by expectant mothers amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The study seeks to clarify the factors that contribute to the heightened levels of anxiety among pregnant women during this unprecedented public health crisis.

METHODS
Design

The author uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis known as the acronym AFI (Smith & Osborn, 2008) to understand the perceptual experiences of pregnant women fasting during the covid-19 pandemic and the meanings attached to this experience. The AFI approach is used when there is limited knowledge about a topic in a particular study. Thus, AFI felt it was appropriate to gain an in-depth understanding of the anxiety experienced by pregnant women during the covid-19 pandemic. This approach will allow researchers to explore further specific subjective experiences in participants by considering demographic differences such as marital status, informant occupation or their husband occupation, etc.

Informants

The author contacted several companions to be invited to be informants. The criteria that must be met to become informants are those who are pregnant and have restricted activities outside the home due to the covid-19 pandemic. The number of participants in this study were seven pregnant women. The author follows Smith & Shinebourne (2012) advice who say that participants in AFI research should be in small numbers in order to obtain detailed information. The large number of samples would make it difficult for researchers to collect data and tend to produce premature generalizations.

Instruments

The author used a semi-structured interview consisting of two components, demographic questions and anxiety-related questions. This selection is based on the opinion of Smith & Osborn (2008) which says that semi-structured interviews will provide space for interviewers and respondents to develop empathy for one another, high flexibility, which allows the interviewer to ask new questions, and semi- structured interview tends to produce more comprehensive data. Anxiety-
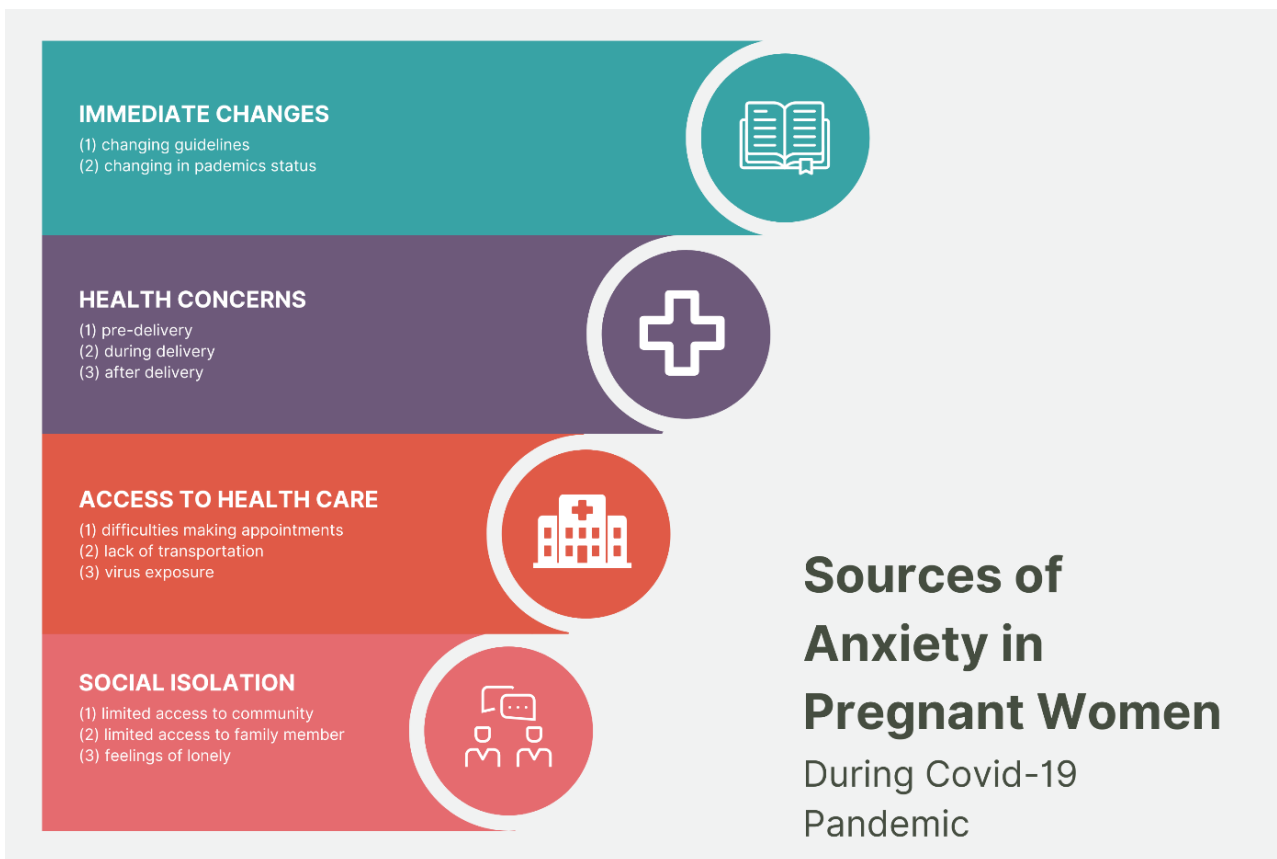
Figure 1. Main themes and sub-themes of anxiety sources among pregnant women

related questions are based on pregnancy-related anxiety (Bayrampour et al., 2016). There are thirteen main questions to determine the anxiety that will be asked.

Procedure

After receiving research permission from Research Institute of Universitas Ma'arif Lampung, author was contacting several people who met the criteria, the authors asked about their willingness to be involved in this study by becoming participants. The author conveys essential matters related to the research, including research objectives, time commitment, benefits, and confidentiality of informants' data. Seven people are willing to be respondents. The informants were then asked to prepare 30-40 minutes of free time. Researchers or research assistants could interview the informants (both of whom have the same educational background in guidance and counseling) via video call or telephone. If the interview needed to be improved, the researcher contacted the respondent again using WhatsApp text messages. Interviews were conducted in May – June 2020.

Table 1. Demographical information of participants

No	Initials	Occupation	Marital status	Husband occupation
1	AC	Lecturer	Married	Lecturer
2	HF	Lecturer	Married	Police officer
3	ZJ	Lecturer	Married	Lecturer
4	IM	Teacher	Married	Self-employed
5	TW	Teacher	Married	Teacher
6	EK	Teacher	Married	Teacher
7	EA	Housewife	Married	Teacher

Data Analysis

The author uses the AFI data analyst guide created by Smith & Osborn (2008). In general, there are four stages of AFI data analysis, namely 1) looking for themes from each participant, 2) connecting the themes found, 3) connecting the themes found in each participant, and 4) starting to report the results of the analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Results

All participants were married, the majority were already working, and all husbands of the interviewees had permanent jobs amidst the rampant workforce reduction (see table 1). After carrying out the stages of analysis, we found five main themes that cause anxiety in pregnant women during the COVID-19 pandemic. These themes are immediate changes, health concerns, access to health care, and social isolation. The sub-themes that appear after the central theme can be seen in figure 1.

Immediate changes

The first phenomenological theme that arise from the analysis was "immediate changes". This theme included two sub-themes namely changing guidelines and changing in pandemic status. Participants explained that they were not used to with new regulation during pandemic. Following are expression that made by participants related to this theme.

 "…sekarang kan kemana-mana sudah harus menggunakan masker makanya saya tidak berani keluar bebas kalau tidak ada keperluan mendesak." (EA-1)

"…ngeri, karena sekarang di daerah saya sudah masuk zona merah jadi harus lebih hati-hati." (HF-2)

Health concerns

The second phenomenological theme that arise from the analysis was "health concerns". This theme included three sub-themes namely pre, during, and after delivery. Participants explained that they were worried about their health, furthermore they also anxious about their fetus condition which divided into three sub-themes. Following are expression that made by participants related to health concern theme.

"…saya takut keluar rumah karena khawatir kondisi sekarang (pandemi) bisa berpengaruh terhadap janin saya." (TW-1)

"…saya khawatir saat lahiran saya sedang kena covid, terus bayi saya yang baru harus tertular." (IM-2)

"…saya agak cemas kalau harus mengajak anak bepergian misalnya imunisasi bayi, karena kan kondisi bayi masih rentan dengan penyakit, apalagi covid." (AC-3)

Access to health care

The third theme that emerge from the analysis was "access to health care". This theme included three sub-themes namely difficulties making appointments, lack of transportation, and virus

exposure. Participants explained that they were worried regarding their access to health care. Following are expression that made by participants related to access to health care theme.

"...saya kepikiran terus, khawatirnya nanti pas mau lahiran ternyata dokter tempat saya biasa konsul sedang ramai pasiennya." (EP-1)

"...kami berencana lahiran di tempat orang tua, tapia agak khawatir karena jarak tempuhnya lama apalagi harus pakai kendaraan pribadi karena susah cari angkutan umum." (EA-2)

"...ada rasa cemas kalau pas saya sedang tertular harus mengikuti protokol Kesehatan secara ketat terus tidak mendapat layanan yang tepat untuk ibu hamil." (AC-3)

Social isolation

The fourth or final phenomenological theme that arise from the analysis was "social isolation". This theme included three sub-themes namely limited access to community, limited access to family member, and feelings of lonely. Participants explained that they were worried about the social isolation. Following are expression that made by participants related to social isolation theme.

"...kadang ada keinginan untuk berkumpul dengan teman-teman tapi saya khawatir nanti berbahaya buat Kesehatan saya dan janin." (IM-1)

"...merasa sedih karena baru-baru ini ada anggota keluarga yang positif terkena covid, tetapi tidak diperbolehkan untuk menjenguk karena alasan protokol kesehatan." (EK-2)

"...saya kadang merasa kesepian terutama saat suami sedang bekerja karena kami di sini hanya tinggal berdua, jauh dari orang tua dan keluarga." (EA-3)

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate anxiety among pregnant women during covid-19 pandemic. We found four main themes after conducting the phenomenological analysis, namely immediate changes, health concerns, access to health care, and social isolation. Furthermore, as the majority of participants and their spouse were having a reliable occupation so they were not experience financial concerns.

There are growing body in literatures related to pregnant women anxiety during covid-19 pandemic. Some findings of these literatures are inline with current study findings, while some other research said quite differently. For example, Corbett et al. (2020) found that pregnant women concerned about older relatives, their children, and their fetus. Furthermore, they also worried about government instruction on social distancing which resulted crucial changes in their behavior. Similarly, Basu et al. (2021) found that pregnant women mostly worry about their pregnancy and delivery, including lack of support during delivery and changes to the delivery plan. Furthermore, missing medical appointments and excessive information about covid also significantly contribute to the development of anxiety.

In the other hand, Mortavazi et al. (2021) found that one of the factors that could contribute to the increased anxiety is employment status and monthly family income. Current study findings might be affected by socio-demographical condition of participants. As the majority of the participants and their husband were had reliable occupation, thus they were not worried about their

financial condition. Despite the findings of this study clearly said that financial stress not being factor contribute to the pregnant women anxiety, further research is needed to re-confirm this finding.

This study highlights the prevalence of anxiety among pregnant women during covid-19 pandemic. It also emphasizes the importance of taking into consideration factors such as immediate changes, health concerns, access to health care, and social isolation while implementing intervention to reduce this issue. Furthermore, policymakers should prioritize these four main themes in arranging guidelines or protocol specifically for pregnant women. This study is limited to pregnant woman only; therefore, the findings are not widely generalizable to other group of community. Furthermore, a limited sample should be acknowledged as we only interview seven interviewee and from participants who had a reliable occupation such as teachers, lecturers, and police officer. Further study should address all these limitations to make the findings more generalizable.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study found four main themes that cause anxiety among pregnant women during covid-19 pandemic. The main themes found were immediate changes, health concerns, access to health care, and social isolation. There are no financial concerns emerged in the theme as majority of the participants and their spouse were have reliable jobs, even during pandemic, such as teachers, lecturers, and police officers. It is recommended that healthcare services should addressing these four main themes to reduce anxiety among pregnant women during covid-19 pandemic. Despite there are no financial concerns found, it is important to recognize that many pregnant women possibly still experience financial difficulties.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Author agrees to the final version of this article.

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