

Mid-life vulnerabilities in Indonesia: A comparative lifecourse perspective

Elisabeth Schröder-Butterfill, University of Southampton
emsb@soton.ac.uk

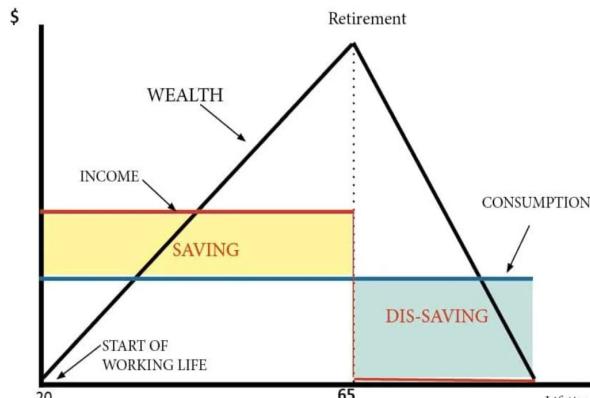
1

Case Study: Pak Anwar

Early 50s; East Java; well-off background, some periods of hardship; SMA education; irresponsible youth; settling down upon marriage; adopted son; support from wider network; economic success; leadership role in extended family; care of mother; good reputation.

2

Caricature of Mid-Life



Source: <https://www.economicshelp.org/blog/27080/concepts/life-cycle-hypothesis/>

3

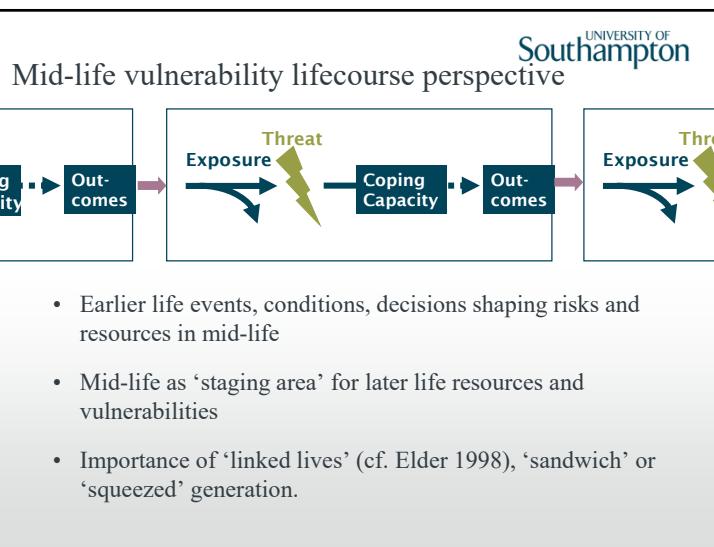
Midlife in Academic Literature

Neglected part of the human lifecourse; often narrow focus on specific issues (menopause; 'empty nest', midlife crisis) (cf. Jacques, 1965; Levinson et al, 1978; Sheehy, 1976).

Difficult to define: chronologically or by social roles (Infurna et al. 2020)? Overlap with earlier and later stages. Demographic, economic, societal and epidemiological changes creating huge heterogeneity → importance of comparative research.

Midlife as a pivotal period that involves “balancing growth and decline ... linking earlier and later periods of life, and ... bridging younger and older generations” (Lachman et al. 2015:20).

4



5

Methodology

Comparative ethnography and household surveys in 6 Indonesian communities.

Focus on five lifecourse stages (childhood; youth; family formation; mid-life; later life). Collection of life histories.

Paper draws on preliminary analysis of life histories from Java, Sumatra and Alor.



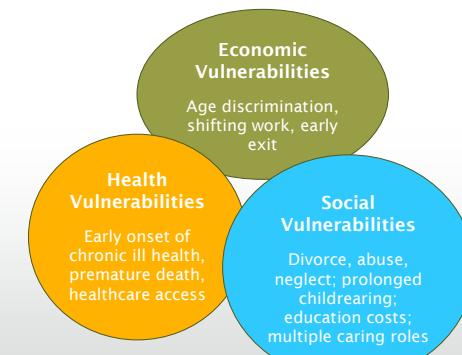
6

Case Study: Bu Kusti & Pak Hadi

Aged 50, East Java; difficult background, poor education, early marriage; loss of children; disharmony, debts; husband's early health decline; re-entry into work; shift in gender roles; support from children, care of elderly mother and husband.

7

Interlinking vulnerabilities



8

Economic vulnerabilities



- At 'top of the game'?
- Significant levels of occupational change;
- Age discrimination → self-employment;
- Early exit from or reduction in work;
- Pressure from young to provide childcare.

9

Health Vulnerabilities

- Early onset of chronic illness (esp. high blood pressure, stroke, diabetes, rheumatism)
- Accumulation of health threats (hard work, smoking, drink, salt, sugar, fat; lack of exercise);
- Inadequate access to health services (though improvements with introduction of health insurance);

10

9

10

Social vulnerabilities

- Marital conflict, divorce, widowhood, plural marriage;
- Late or extended period of responsibility for young;
- Educational costs (and their uncertain returns).



11

Caring

- Some caring responsibilities in midlife are expected and embraced (esp. occasional grandchild care);
- Extreme caring responsibilities (long-term, intense, concentrated on 1-2 carers) interfere with other social and economic roles;
- Importance of intra-generational care due to health vulnerabilities;
- NB: impact on future resources



12

Coping resources

- Family and community networks;
- Access to health care and health insurance;
- (Limited) Government support;
- (Vulnerable) portfolio livelihoods.



13

Preliminary Conclusions

Middle age in contemporary Indonesia: not primarily stability and success;

Age discrimination as a major concern;

Early onset of economic and health declines → stage set for later life vulnerabilities;

Economic, health and social challenges as mutually exacerbating, undermining likelihood of a secure old age.

14

Acknowledgements

Fieldstaff: Benny Delpada, Anna Baransano, Dian Lintang Sudibyo, Tengku Syawila Fithry, Dyah Rahayuningtyas, Vita Priantina Dewi.

Research Assistant: Dr Claire Poppy

Funding:

Australian Research
Council Discovery Grant
(DP170101044)



15