

The Wounds Behind the Numbers: A Phenomenological Study of Men's Experiences in Facing Bride Price Pressure from a Social Accounting Perspective

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Abstract

Uang panai is a Bugis-Makassar customary practice that has increasingly transformed into a significant financial burden for men seeking marriage. This study aims to explore the lived experience of men facing uang panai pressure through the lens of social accounting. A qualitative phenomenological approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed to analyze in-depth interview data from nine male informants in South Sulawesi. Four main themes emerged: (1) uang panai as a social accountability burden exceeding economic capacity; (2) psychological pressure and masculinity identity crisis; (3) negotiation and resistance strategies; and (4) redefinition of uang panai meaning within contemporary social accounting frameworks. Findings affirm that uang panai has shifted from a symbolic-cultural function to a financially-based social control mechanism creating deep psychological wounds, while urging value reconstruction of customary practices.

Keywords

uang panai, phenomenology, social accounting



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INTRODUCTION

Marriage in the Bugis-Makassar culture of South Sulawesi is not simply a sacred event uniting two individuals, but rather a social event encompassing complex cultural, economic, and symbolic dimensions. One of the most prominent elements of this traditional wedding process is the dowry (pengupai), a sum of money given by the prospective groom to the prospective bride's family as a form of appreciation (sompā) and a marker of the social status of both families.

Historically, the amount of the dowry was determined by the woman's education level, family background, and social stratification (siri' na pace). However, in contemporary developments, the amount has escalated significantly, reaching

hundreds of millions of rupiah in some regions (Wahyuningsih et al., 2024). This phenomenon creates a stressful social reality for men seeking marriage, particularly those from the lower-middle class.

From a social accounting perspective, the dowry can be understood as a social accountability mechanism in which men are "measured" and "accounted for" based on their financial capabilities (Gray et al., 1997). The demanded figure represents not merely economic value, but also social dignity, masculine capacity, and power relations within families (Dillard & Vinnari, 2019). While much previous research has examined dowry from a sociological and anthropological perspective (Mattulada, 2020; Hadikusuma, 2019), studies integrating a social accounting perspective with men's psychological experiences are still very limited.

This study aims to fill this gap in the literature by using a phenomenological approach, an appropriate method for capturing the essence of the subjects lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research questions are: (1) How do men subjectively experience the pressure of dowry? (2) How is dowry interpreted as a form of social accountability? (3) What are the psychological impacts on men? and (4) What are men's strategies for responding to dowry demands?

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method. This approach was chosen because the research objective was to deeply understand men's subjective experiences in a social reality rich with nuances and complexities that cannot be reduced to statistics (Moleong, 2021; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

The study was conducted in Makassar City and its surrounding areas from March to May 2026. Informants were selected using purposive sampling with the following criteria: (1) men aged 22–45 who had or were in the process of marrying a Bugis-Makassarese family; (2) had experienced the dowry negotiation process directly; and (3) were willing to share their experiences openly. Nine informants were selected based on the principle of data saturation (Guest et al., 2020).

Data were collected through in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guide developed from theoretical studies. Data analysis followed a six-stage IPA procedure: rereading transcripts, taking initial notes, developing emergent themes, exploring relationships between themes, identifying thematic patterns across cases, and developing final interpretations. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation, member checking, and researcher reflexivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Bride Price as a Burden of Social Accountability

The first theme that emerged from the data analysis was how bride price is perceived as a form of social accountability an obligation to "give account" to the community through financial capacity. Nearly all informants revealed that the greatest pressure comes not from financial capacity alone, but from the social expectations that accompany the bride price.

INF-02 (Akbar) experienced an intensive negotiation process, with the initial amount of IDR 250 million being reduced to IDR 150 million. He revealed that his family was "quite shocked but didn't show it during the meeting to maintain the family's dignity and prestige." This phrase clearly reflects that responses to the bride price always have a public and social dimension. This aligns with Gray et al.'s (1997) proposition that social accountability is the process by which individuals account for their actions and capacities to society.

INF-08 (Syahrul) asserted that bride price "represents the value of a girl who is to be married" and serves as "a standard to demonstrate the extent to which a man is able to shoulder responsibility." This reflects Roberts' (1991) concept of individualizing accountability, where men are isolated and judged based on their individual financial capabilities, without considering the broader economic context.

Psychological Pressure and Masculinity Identity Crisis

The second theme reveals the profound psychological dimension of bride price pressure. The impact is not only financial, but also touches on the realm of identity and self-esteem. INF-01 (Fadlan, barberman) explicitly expressed his identity pressure: "I kept asking myself, am I worthy of proposing under these conditions?" This narrative reflects what Vandello & Bosson (2013) call precarious masculinity, a fragile social status that must be continually proven and is vulnerable to financial failure.

INF-03 (Yusuf, farmer) described even more severe pressure: "Burdened by the agricultural conditions, where the harvest is somewhat meager. My mind is constantly thinking about how to manage it." His community even considered the bride price "almost impossible for a farmer to afford," a stigma that exacerbated the psychological pressure. INF-05 (Alim) added a very candid reflection: "Sometimes I think, 'Do I really have to get married?' Because I'm not married yet, the test has already begun."

One of the most interesting findings is that psychological pressure is felt not only by those actively negotiating, but also by men who haven't even begun the formal process. INF-04 (Wahyu) revealed: "There's no direct pressure yet, but I'm already psychologically burdened by high expectations." This suggests that the dowry

accountability system operates like a social panopticon (Foucault, 1977) in which men constantly internalize the standards by which their worthiness is measured.

Negotiation and Resistance Strategies

The third theme reveals that informants are not simply passive objects in the dowry accountability system, but develop various negotiation and resistance strategies that reflect varying levels of agency.

The identified strategies include: (1) negotiation based on open communication. INF-07 (Andi) prepares for early discussions with his prospective wife as a "show-stopper" to the woman's family; (2) mobilization of mutual cooperation networks. INF-03 (Yusuf) relies on the assistance of relatives and friends; (3) systematic savings preparation. INF-07 saves well in advance of the proposal process so that there is "no significant psychological impact"; (4) acceptance based on sincerity. INF-09 (Ardan, married) goes through the process "sincerely and responsibly"; and (5) strengthening spirituality. INF-01, INF-06, and INF-09 consistently cite worship and closeness to God as sources of mental resilience.

An interesting contrast is seen between INF-07, who successfully minimized stress through systematic preparation, and INF-03, who faced structural barriers as a farmer with an uncertain income. This difference confirms that the ability to develop effective strategies is heavily influenced by the economic and social capital possessed (Shearer, 2002).

Redefining the Meaning of Panai Money

The fourth theme reveals the informants' critical reflections on the panai money system itself. Most informants identified a shift from its authentic symbolic-cultural function (respect and seriousness) to a socially competitive function.

INF-06 (Ivan) stated: "It's changed now. It should have been just a dowry, but now it seems to be a marker of social status." INF-08 (Syahrul) added: "Some see that the panai money is used as a means of showing off and boasting." INF-04 (Wahyu) offered a reformist idea: the need for "maximum and minimum standards" set with considerations of fairness.

Within the framework of social accounting, this shift can be understood as the loss of "social relevance" from the dowry system. Dillard & Vinnari (2019) emphasize that a sustainable social accountability system must have legitimacy in the eyes of all stakeholders, including men, who have so far been positioned only as objects of accountability, not as subjects with a say in defining its standards.

CONCLUSION

This study yielded four main findings. First, the dowry in the contemporary context has functioned as a social accountability mechanism that positions men as "audited entities" by the community based on their financial capacity—a mechanism that is asymmetrical and coercive. Second, the pressures created by the dowry system are not only financial, but also psychological and identity-based, creating what this study calls "the wound behind the numbers." Third, the informants developed various negotiation and resistance strategies that reflect their recognition that they are not passive objects in the system, but rather subjects actively seeking space for negotiation. Fourth, most informants developed critical reflections that encouraged a redefinition of the meaning of dowry toward a more equitable reconstruction of values.

This study contributes to the social accounting literature by providing an empirical examination of how culture-based social accountability mechanisms operate in the Southeast Asian context. The concept of "the wound behind the numbers" generated by this study offers a new conceptual contribution that connects the social accounting literature with the psychology of financial stress. Limitations of this study include the use of online interviews that limit probing, the limited perspective of men, and the limited geographic scope of Makassar. Further research is recommended to include women's perspectives, conduct comparative studies across sub-ethnicities, and use a longitudinal approach.

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