Factors Affecting Parental Psychological Flexibility During Pandemic COVID-19: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Recent research has noted an increase in parents' mental health problems caused by the changing situation of the COVID-19 pandemic. This rapid change requires parents to adapt to prevent mental health problems by increasing psychological flexibility. This study aims to conduct a systematic literature review of the factors that affect parents' psychological flexibility. The literature study uses articles from the 2020 range published in Scopus, ScienceDirect, ProQuest, SpringerLink, and Google Scholar. The characteristics of the items reviewed were English-language articles, and the study participants were parents, pieces with the quantitative and qualitative design. They focused on factors that affect the psychological flexibility of parents. A total of 6 articles on factors that affect the psychological flexibility of parents met the inclusion criteria. This systematic literature study shows that parental psychological flexibility is associated with constructive parenting, low-stress levels, and a family source. Psychological flexibility is essential to improve the resilience and mental health of parents. More research on psychological flexibility in parents is needed now. Besides, further analysis can develop programs that function to increase parental psychological flexibility in the new standard era or post-COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords
Psychological Flexibility, Mental Health, Parenting, COVID-19

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic that has occurred since 2019 has caused not only physical health problems, but also mental health problems, such as anxiety, fear, distress, and depression (Tee et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Zhang Y & Ma Z, 2020). Research has shown that mental health problems associated with the COVID-19 pandemic situation are not only experienced by individuals but can also have an impact on families (Patrick et al., 2020), particularly on parenting (Brown et al., 2020; Spinelli, Lionetti, Setti, et al., 2020).

Ren et al. (2020) explained that in the face of a pandemic situation, parents need to spend more energy and time caring for their children than usual. Spinelli, Lionetti, Pastore, et al. (2020) in their research explained that parents who reported difficulties with parenting during quarantine felt more difficult and pressured to find time and space for themselves, their partners, children, and activities that were usually carried out before quarantine. Chung et al. (2020) explained that exposure to stressors during a pandemic can cause physical, emotional, and cognitive exhaustion which can put a strain on the parent-child relationship. This is explained by Spinelli, Lionetti, Setti, et al. (2020) in their research that the level of household chaos can affect parenting pressure, where parents who live in an

unorganized and chaotic home perceive relationships with children as a less enjoyable and more stressful experience during quarantine at home.

Stress in parenting problems can occur because parents do not have good psychological flexibility. Crasta et al. (2020) explain that the psychological inflexibility of parents can be a major factor that increases the impact of stress on COVID-19. Besides, research shows that stress, parenting problems, disputes, and suffering experienced by parents and children that occur due to COVID-19 can be caused by the tendency of parents to be psychologically inflexible (Daks et al., 2020; Fonseca et al., 2020). Also, parental psychological inflexibility can lead to lower psychological flexibility, higher levels of stress in parents, and poor parenting practices (Brown et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2012). Thus, the ability for parents is needed to be able to adapt to difficult situations such as the current pandemic by having good psychological flexibility.

Research shows that psychological flexibility is correlated with acceptance, the dimension of the emotional understanding schema, higher value, control, consensus, and expression (Silberstein et al., 2012), which individual who psychologically flexible are more likely to believe that the perceived emotions make sense, other people accept their emotions, looking emotional experiences as clarifying values, believe that they have control of the emotions they feel, can normalize these emotions, and more accepting of the emotional experiences they experience and are willing to experience and express the emotions they feel. Leeming and Hayes (2016) explain that parents who can apply psychological flexibility, mindfulness, and compassion in their lives will be better prepared to be able to maintain a strong family environment and be psychologically healthier.

1.1 Objectives

Studies that discuss psychological flexibility have long been performed, but studies more specifically about the factors affecting parents' psychological flexibility concerning parenting of the COVID-19 pandemic are still few. This study aimed to conduct a systematic literature review on the factors that influence the psychological flexibility of parents.

2. Literature Review

Psychological flexibility is defined by Hayes et al. (2012) as a willingness to contacting the present moment, fully without unnecessary defense and to increase or change behavior in pursuit of goals and values. Kashdan dan Rottenberg (2010) explain that psychological flexibility is a transdiagnostic concept that requires both interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, and approaches as a foundation of mental health because it is related to resilience. Hayes et al. (2012) explained that there are six dimensions related to psychological flexibility, namely: (a) Present-Moment Awareness, in this dimension it emphasizes that currently is a place where acceptance and attenuation are carried out, as well as a place where assessments and actions are carried out with great relevance; (b) Acceptance, i.e acceptance to relate to experiences or situations, or compelling personal interactions; (c) Self-as-Context, in this dimension there is the concept of "I-here-now" where individuals with more experience about people, times and places will find it easy to abstract what does not change in the answer, namely perspective-taking; (d) Defusion, i.e the ability to be able to retreat from an unpleasant experience without being trapped in those experience (Rolffs et al., 2018), where defusion can occur only by speaking the mind as a thought, or the language of thoughts and behavior becomes weak through practice behavior; (e) Connecting with Values, in this dimension, values are freely chosen, evolved, and dynamic which then forms a dominant reinforcement in terms of cherished behavior involvement; and (f) Commited Action, consisting of specific actions at specific moments, whereas values involve free-choice qualities, are verbally constructed from actions that take place, so actions based on values are actions that are deliberately designed to embody particular value and instrinsicly reinforce (Shofwan et al. 2021). According to Rolffs et al. (2018), the related dimensions of psychological flexibility are seen as important to improve mental health and individual well-being promoted in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). Psychological flexibility can be improved by a variety of different therapeutic methods and approaches (McCracken & Morley, 2014). One approach that is specifically designed to increase psychological flexibility is a form of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy called ACT (Hayes et al., 2012; Levin et al., 2012; McCracken & Morley, 2014).

Research has shown that psychological flexibility is associated with good mental health. Research by Gloster et al. (2017) shows that psychological flexibility moderates mental and physical health, and well-being outcomes in the general population. This is also stated by Dawson and Golijani-Moghaddam (2020) in their research which shows

that psychological flexibility is positively correlated with well-being and negatively correlates with distress. Furthermore, Gloster et al. (2017) explain that individuals who can interact with the demands of a stressful environment flexibly can have greater physical, mental, and well-being results than individuals who are not flexible even though the individual is experiencing more stress. Leahy et al. (2012) explained that individuals who show low psychological flexibility will perceive their emotions more negatively. Research shows that psychological flexibility serves as a form of resilience to several risk factors associated with depression and suicidal thoughts (Bryan et al., 2015; Crasta et al., 2020).

Regarding family, research reveals that psychological flexibility abilities among family can influence each other between family members, where psychologically inflexible parents have an impact on poor parenting practices and lower psychological flexibility in children (Fonseca et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2012). Following research conducted by Beeckman et al. (2019), the psychological flexibility that parents have contributes indirectly to the emotional and psychosocial function of children, where parents who show an open attitude, accept the child's ilness and increase interactions in engaging in valuable activities with children can improve psychological flexibility in children. Also, research conducted by Wallace et al. (2015) on adolescents suffering from chronic illnesses showed that adolescents of parents who have greater psychological flexibility tend to have more acceptance of the pain experienced. Thus, having psychological flexibility can increase loving interactions among family members and support all family functions, as well as being a source of resilience in the family (Daks et al., 2020).

Based on the explanation above, it can be concluded that psychological flexibility is the ability to adapt to difficult situations and becomes the foundation of mental health because it is related to individual resilience. So, this psychological flexibility is important to have, especially in this study, for parents because with psychological flexibility, parents can build a positive parenting style, loving interaction among family member, and build good family resilience.

3. Methods

The method used in this research is a systematic literature study compiled using guidelines from the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA). The research was conducted to answer the following research questions: (a) what is the condition of the psychological flexibility experienced by parents during the COVID-19 pandemic; and (b) what factors affect the psychological flexibility of parents during the COVID-19 pandemic? Data collection in this research was obtained through several stages, including literature study to conduct data assessment studies related to the SLR Method in journals obtained from Scopus, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, ProQuest, and SpringerLink, and documentation by saving articles found into Mendeley's software.

4. Data Collection

The data search in this study was conducted using several databases, i.e ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, Scopus, SpringerLink, and ProQuest. In the process of searching for articles that meet the inclusion criteria, researchers are guided with appropriate keywords from the topic and research title, i.e "Psychological Flexibility" AND "Parents" OR "Mother and Father" AND "Parenting". The articles that have been collected are filtered through two stages. In the first stage, researchers filtered through the entire titles and abstracts generated by the database search. In the second stage, the articles are filtered by looking at the entire articles that have been obtained.

The research articles that met the inclusion criteria in this study were: (a) English-language research articles from the 2020 range; (b) quantitative and qualitative research design; (c) the study participants were parents; and (d) focusing on the factors that affect the psychological flexibility of parents. In the current COVID-19 pandemic situation, mental health problems coincide with physical health problems that occur. These mental health problems have an impact on the family. Research has shown that the incidence of the COVID-19 pandemic can have an impact on parenting stress (Chung et al., 2020; Ren et al., 2020; Spinelli, Lionetti, Pastore, et al., 2020; Spinelli, Lionetti, Setti, et al., 2020). Therefore, it takes the ability for parents to be able to adapt to difficult situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic, this ability which is then referred to as psychological flexibility.

5. Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study was classified into two domains: the impact of the pandemic on the condition of the parental psychological flexibility and the factors that affect the psychological flexibility of parents during the COVID-19 pandemic. These domains were used to frame the analysis and discussion related to the factors that affect the psychological flexibility of parents during the COVID-19 pandemic. The variables extracted in this study were the time of article publication, research design, number of participants, and data analysis.

6. Results and Discussion

The data search process in the study was conducted from 17-19 February 2021, and as many as 20 articles were obtained. Then, the research articles that have been obtained were filtered based on the title, abstract, duplication, keywords, and full text of the article. A total of 14 articles did not meet the inclusion criteria. This is due to the existence of the duplicate article, the article is a review article, does not explain factors affecting the psychological flexibility of parents, and the research subject is not the parents. Thus, as many as 6 articles were selected for review. The process of searching for articles is shown in Figure 1.

The literature obtained for this review study consisted of six studies (Benjamin et al., 2020; Chong et al., 2020; Crasta et al., 2020; Daks et al., 2020; Fonseca et al., 2020; Peltz et al., 2020) where all publications are articles in English and published in 2020 involving as many as 3,434 parents as research participants. The countries that published the article were the United States, Hong Kong, and Portugal. The summary of the six review articles obtained is shown in Table 1.

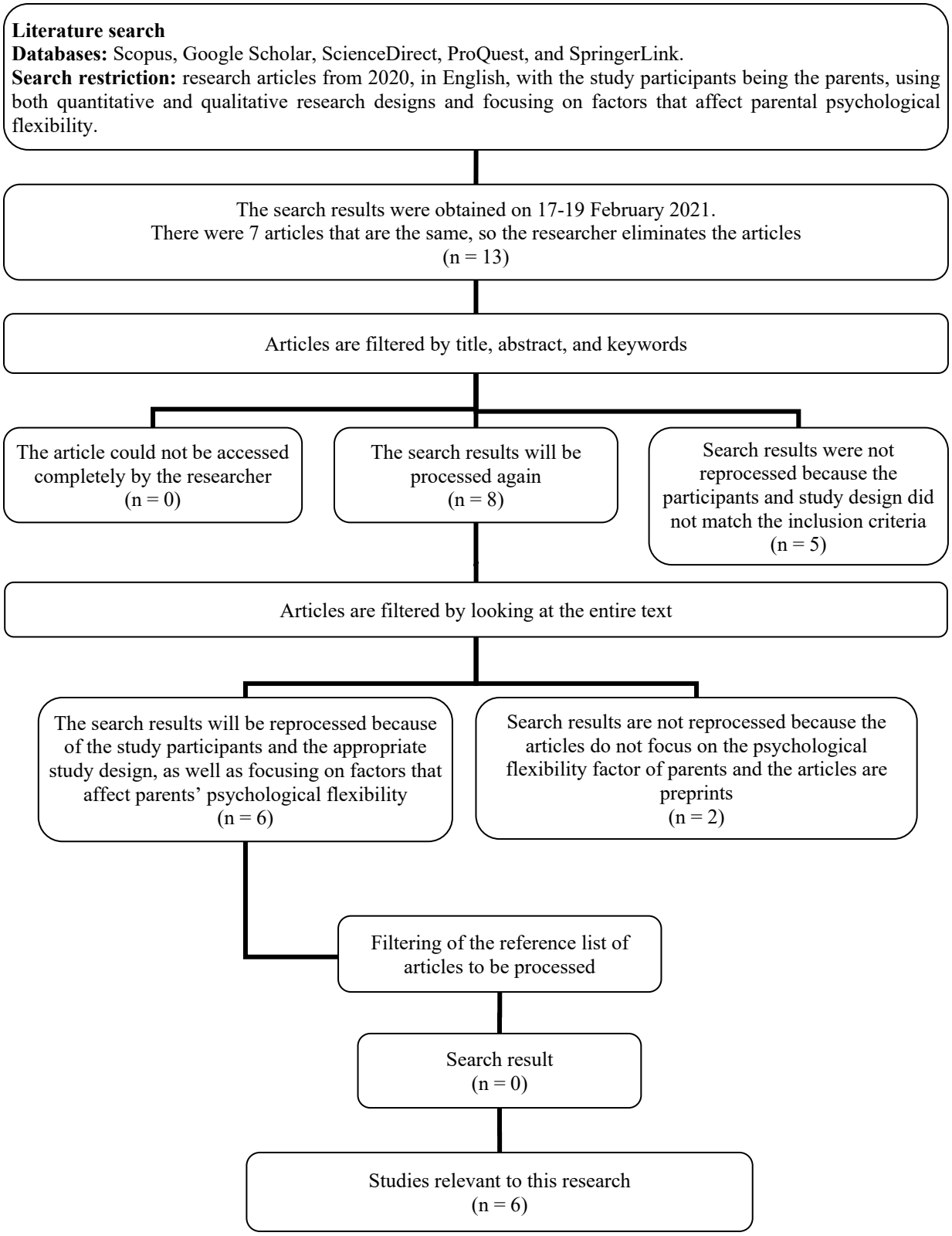

Figure 1. Stages of Search for Research Articles

Table 1. Summary of Article Reviews

No.	Authors	Participants	Result	Country
1.	Daks et al., (2020)	742 coparents of children (ages 5–18 years old).	Parent psychological flexibility shows the relationship with constructive parenting (namely democratic, inductive, and positive / reinforcing parenting styles), while the psychological inflexibility of parents is not related to parenting behavior.	United State of America
2.	Crasta et al. (2020)	1003 parents	Low psychological inflexibility of parents, have a very negative relationship with COVID-19 stress and desire to die through perceived burdensomeness (i.e., resource stress predicting slightly lower desire to die through slightly lower perceived load).	United State of America
3.	Peltz et al. (2020)	1003 parents of children (ages 5–18 years old)	The COVID-19 stressors are associated with psychological flexibility and inflexibility through the parental daily functioning (i.e., energy) and perception of sleep quality, which higher energy levels predict higher levels of psychological flexibility.	United State of America
4.	Benjamin et al. (2020)	Parents (242 mothers and 26 fathers, age 34–76 years old)	Parents are able to learn to reduce catastrophic thoughts about the pain their child is experiencing and become more psychologically flexible, by paying attention to and accepting the distress their child is experiencing while remaining present in the moment. The results of the multiple regression analysis showed that changes in parental psychological flexibility, and particularly emotional acceptance, were unique predictors of better well-being at follow-up, while changes in adolescent functioning and parental pain did not predict improved well-being.	United State of America
5.	Chong et al. (2020)	168 parents.	The improvement in psychological flexibility of parents significantly mediates the effect of interventions to reduce asthma symptoms in childhood. It was found that there was a reciprocal relationship where the symptoms of childhood asthma at daytime and at night at 3-months post intervention significantly predicted the psychological flexibility of the parents at 6-months post intervention. ACT-based asthma management programs on children's health outcomes have short-term effects that may have played an influential role in promoting parental psychological flexibility.	Hong Kong
6.	Fonseca et al. (2020)	250 mothers of children between 2-12 years old.	Lower levels of psychological flexibility in parenting are associated with higher levels of parenting stress which is negatively related to the use of authoritative parenting styles and positively associated with the use of maladaptive (permissive and authoritarian) parenting styles.	Portugal

The first source of literature is research written by Daks et al. (2020), which aims to measure the level of psychological flexibility parents have in facing challenges during a pandemic that can have a psychological impact on other family members (children). The results showed that parents who tend to be psychologically inflexible will affect family disputes, stress on the COVID-19 pandemic, parenting problems, and the suffering experienced by parents and children. Also, Daks et al. (2020) explain that the psychological flexibility experienced by parents shows a moderate relationship to constructive parenting, i.e democratic, inductive parenting, and the existence of positive or strengthening parenting practices. In this study, the factors that influence psychological flexibility are constructive parenting and positive and strengthening parenting practices.

The second source of literature is research articles written by Crasta et al. (2020). This study aims to determine the contribution of stressors associated with COVID-19 in general to interpersonal risk for suicide and the role of psychological flexibility and inflexibility in moderating these relationships. Meanwhile, the results of this study indicate that the psychological flexibility of the parents is at a high level and the inflexibility of the parents is at a quite low level. The high psychological flexibility of parents has a negative relationship with stress, perceived burden, and a lower desire to death.

Furthermore, in the third research article written by Peltz et al. (2020). This study aims to examine the potential for stress-related to COVID-19 to affect the psychological flexibility and inflexibility of parents through sleep quality and perceived energy levels. The results of this study indicate that stress related to COVID-19 is related to psychological flexibility and inflexibility through perceptions of sleep quality and parents' daily functions, i.e energy, which in the study explained that the higher energy levels of parents can predict psychological flexibility higher. Thus, the factors that can affect psychological flexibility in this study are the daily functions of the parents, i.e higher energy.

Then, the fourth literature source uses research articles from Benjamin et al. (2020). The aim of this study was to evaluate the effect of an interdisciplinary pediatric pain treatment program on the parents of adolescents participating in the study, in particular the mental health and quality of life of the elderly. This study shows the results that parents are able to learn to reduce catastrophic thoughts about the pain experienced by children and become more flexible psychologically, namely by paying attention and accepting the difficulties experienced by children while continuing to be present at this time. In this study, emotional acceptance is a factor in changing the psychological flexibility experienced by parents.

The fifth research article, written by Chong et al. (2020) which aims to explore whether parental psychological flexibility changes mediate changes in parental psychological distress and childhood asthma symptoms in a sample of a parent-child dyad where the parents have undergone an ACT-based pediatric asthma management program. The results of the study indicated that parental psychological flexbility improvement significantly mediated the effect of the intervention in reducing asthma symptoms in children. The reciprocal relationship was found in the results of this study, in which the childhood asthma symptoms at 3 months of intervention were significantly predictive of parental psychological flexibility at 6 months of intervention. This suggests that the short-term effect of ACT-based asthma management programs on children's health outcomes has played an influential role in encouraging parents' psychological flexibility. So that the factors affecting the psychological flexibility of parents in this study are the health conditions of the child.

The last source of literature is the research conducted by Fonseca et al. (2020). This study aimed to explore the role of psychological flexibility concerning parenting in the relationship between parental stress and parenting styles in mothers of early and middle age children, as well as the moderating role of globally psychological flexibility. The results of this study indicate that higher levels of parenting stress are associated with lower parental psychological flexibility in parenting, which is positively related to the use of maladaptive parenting styles, i.e authoritarian and permissive, and negatively related to the use of authoritative parenting styles. Thus, in this case, parenting stress is a factor that affects psychological flexibility in parents.

Based on the literature review that has been done, the COVID-19 pandemic can have an impact on mental health problems in parents such as stress, anxiety, depression, and even the possibility of suicide ideation (Crasta et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2021; Kerr et al., 2021). The results of research by Johnson et al. (2021) showed that a greater tendency for parents to experience stress was associated with more perceived anxiety and depression. Research has shown that parental mental health has an impact on child development and parenting behavior, whereas parental anxiety is associated with disruptive and controlling parenting (Borelli et al., 2018). The results of the research by Crugnola et al. (2016) showed that mothers with depression and anxiety tended to experience greater parenting stress. When the stress experienced by parents is felt for a long time, it can cause parents to feel burnout, which is a syndrome caused by continuous exposure to parenting stress (Mikolajczak et al., 2018; Roskam et al., 2017). Research conducted by Kerr et al. (2021) showed that in addition to high levels of anxiety and depression, parents reported experiencing at least one symptom of parental burnout early in the COVID-19 pandemic. Daks et al. (2020) explained that greater COVID-19-related stress can be predicted from parental psychological inflexibility, wherein parents who use inflexible or rigid responses to difficult experiences may exacerbate stress experienced by parents from crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Psychological flexibility refers to an individual's ability to accept, cope, and adapt when faced with difficult situations (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010; Rolffs et al., 2016). Research has consistently shown that greater psychological flexibility is associated with reduced mental health problems such as anxiety, distress, and depression, and is associated with increased well-being (Dawson & Golijani-Moghaddam, 2020; Gloster et al., 2011; Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010; Masuda & Tully, 2012; McCracken & Morley, 2014). Masuda et al. (2011) explain that psychological flexibility can be protective against negative feelings and can promote positive mental health when experiencing challenging life events. In line with this, research conducted by Gloster et al. (2017) shows that individuals who can flexibly interact with the demands of a stressful environment have greater mental, physical, and well-being conditions even if they experience more stress than inflexible individuals. Concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, several studies have investigated the mitigating role of psychological flexibility during the pandemic (Dawson & Golijani-Moghaddam, 2020; Kroska et al., 2020). Tindle dan Moustafa (2021) explain that the impact of pandemics such as quarantine, lockdown, and self-isolation on mental health outcomes depends on the psychological flexibility that individuals have. Furthermore, Pakenham et al. (2020) explain that the protective nature of psychological flexibility can be observed when individuals have a strong relationship with personal values, have more self-awareness, and are flexible in different perspectives (self-as-context), can recognize feelings experienced without being trapped in that feeling (diffusion).

The results of research by Daks et al. (2020) showed that parental psychological flexibility can predict family functioning, whereas parental psychological flexibility can predict greater family cohesion, lower family discord, and highlights its potential role as a source of resilience in the family. In addition, Daks et al. (2020) suggested that psychological flexibility is related to constructive parenting, such as democratic or autonomous parenting, inductive, and positive, so that parental psychological flexibility has the potential to empower parents to choose more compassionate or better responses to children's behavior. In line with these findings, the research of Brassell et al. (2016) shows that parental psychological flexibility is associated with greater parenting psychological flexibility, whereas parenting psychological flexibility positively predicts adaptive parenting practices. Psychological flexibility associated with parenting is defined as an individual's ability to accept change and negative thoughts and emotions without judging parental parenting experiences (Brassell et al., 2016; Burke & Moore, 2015). Research has shown that psychological flexibility in parenting can be seen as the skill to regulate emotions in the context of parent-child relationships by not judging, accepting negative thoughts and emotions related to parenting, and being able to engage in value-based behavior than to avoidance or control, with how to encourage sensitive responses to children's needs and good parenting practices (Burke & Moore, 2015; Fonseca et al., 2020).

7. Conclusion

The psychological flexibility of the COVID-19 pandemic is crucial for parents to have, since psychological flexibility can help reduce complaints of parental mental health problems, especially about parenting. The parents' psychological flexibility can be influenced from a variety of factors, such as higher energy, acceptance of negative emotional experiences, low level of parenting stress, low perceived burden, child's health conditions, constructive and positive parenting, and reinforcing parenting practices. These factors are expected to help parents understand and find the right strategy for improving their ability to adapt flexibly in parenting practices in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The limitation of this literature study is the lack of literature that discusses the factors that affect the psychological flexibility of parents in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, the limited research data in the existing literature because the data collection process is not optimal. So research is needed that discusses the factors that affect the parents' psychological flexibility. Based on the results of the literature review that has been conducted, researchers hope that it can be used as a first step for further researchers to provide appropriate interventions to increase the parents' psychological flexibility in the new standard era or post-COVID-19 pandemic.

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