



Factors Influencing the Impact of Fatherlessness on Children's Mental Health: A Case Study of Working-Class Families

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Abstract

Fatherlessness in working-class families has become an important issue affecting children's psychological well-being and mental health, primarily due to limited paternal involvement in parenting. This study aims to analyze the factors contributing to fatherlessness and examine its impact on children's mental health in Saentis Village, Percut Sei Tuan District, Indonesia. A qualitative descriptive case study approach was employed. Data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis involving three participants selected using purposive sampling. The data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model combined with thematic analysis. The findings indicate that fatherlessness is influenced by several structural factors, including economic hardship, unstable employment, divorce, paternal death, and work-related demands that limit fathers' involvement in family life. These conditions contribute to various psychological consequences for children, including anxiety, feelings of insecurity, attachment difficulties, identity confusion, prolonged grief, and accumulated resentment. Interpreted through Erikson's psychosocial development theory, these psychological impacts vary across developmental stages, particularly during the identity versus role confusion stage in adolescence and the intimacy versus isolation stage in early adulthood. The findings highlight the importance of strengthening paternal involvement and provide contextual evidence to support the development of guidance, counseling, and family intervention programs for children experiencing fatherlessness in working-class families.

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Introduction

Children's mental health in working-class families is particularly vulnerable to various psychosocial stressors, including economic hardship, limited parental supervision, and emotional instability. One factor that has received increasing attention is fatherlessness, which refers not only to the physical absence of a father but also to the lack of emotional involvement and caregiving from the father figure (Rahayu et al., 2020). In working-class families, demanding work schedules, unstable employment, and financial pressures often reduce fathers' opportunities to engage in parenting, thereby weakening emotional bonds between fathers and children (Maryam & Mulyaniapi, 2022).

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that fatherlessness is associated with adverse psychological outcomes in children, including low self-esteem, loneliness, anger, grief, poor self-control, anxiety, and difficulties in social relationships (Lerner, 2011; Salsabila, 2020). Research has also shown that paternal involvement contributes significantly to children's emotional regulation, cognitive development, and future interpersonal relationships, particularly among girls (Auni, 2017; Dagnun et al., 2023). Consistent with John Bowlby's Attachment Theory, insufficient emotional attachment to fathers may impair children's emotional security and increase the risk of psychological problems (Bowlby, 1988). Similarly, Rohner and Veneziano (2001) emphasized that paternal acceptance plays an essential role in promoting children's psychological adjustment and emotional well-being.

Rosenthal (2010) further classified fatherlessness into six forms: the disapproving father, mentally ill father, substance-abusing father, abusive father, unreliable father, and absent father. This classification suggests that fatherlessness is a multidimensional phenomenon that extends beyond physical absence to include inadequate paternal emotional support and caregiving. In many developing countries, including Indonesia, fatherlessness frequently occurs because fathers spend considerable time fulfilling economic responsibilities while providing limited emotional engagement with their children.

Despite the growing body of literature, several important gaps remain. Most previous studies have primarily examined the psychological consequences of fatherlessness or focused on specific groups such as adolescents or female children. Comparatively fewer studies have investigated which factors intensify or mitigate the impact of fatherlessness on children's mental health, particularly within working-class families, where economic demands and occupational pressures may shape fathers' parenting involvement differently. Moreover, evidence from the Indonesian socio-cultural context remains limited, even though family structures, cultural expectations regarding paternal roles, and socioeconomic conditions differ substantially from those examined in Western literature.

This study addresses these gaps by investigating the factors that influence the impact of fatherlessness on children's mental health among working-class families in Indonesia through a case study approach. Rather than merely describing the psychological effects of fatherlessness, this research identifies the underlying familial, social, and economic factors that contribute to variations in children's mental health outcomes. By focusing specifically on working-class families, this study provides contextual evidence that complements existing international findings while offering a more nuanced understanding of fatherlessness within the Indonesian cultural setting.

The study is further informed by Erikson's psychosocial development theory, which emphasizes that fathers play an essential role in fostering children's identity formation, emotional security, and social competence (Erikson, 1968). During adolescence, inadequate paternal involvement may contribute to identity confusion and reduced self-confidence, while its effects may persist into adulthood through

difficulties in establishing healthy interpersonal relationships. These theoretical perspectives provide a framework for understanding how fatherlessness influences children's psychological development across different developmental stages.

Given the increasing prevalence of reduced paternal involvement in working-class families, understanding the factors that shape the relationship between fatherlessness and children's mental health is essential. The findings are expected to contribute to family studies, child psychology, and mental health interventions by providing evidence-based recommendations for strengthening paternal involvement and supporting children's psychological well-being in economically vulnerable families.

Methods

This research uses a qualitative descriptive method. Qualitative research is a process that aims to understand how phenomena occur in humans by compiling a comprehensive, complex picture that can be presented in words (Fadli, 2021). The approach used in this research is a case study. A case study is a qualitative method in which researchers explore a particular phenomenon (case) within a specific time and activity (program, event, process, institution, or social group), and collect detailed, in-depth information using various data collection procedures over a specific period (Wahyuningsih, 2013). The interviews were conducted in a structured manner, with questions posed to informants in accordance with interview guidelines. Documentation was conducted to gather data on factors influencing the quality of father-child attachment during preschool. This study used the interactive data analysis model of Miles & Huberman, as cited in Sugiyono (2017).

Miles & Huberman stated that qualitative data analysis is carried out interactively and continuously until the data is saturated. Activities in data analysis are data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data collection techniques include observation, interviews, and documentation. The subjects in this study were residents of Saentis Village who experienced fatherlessness, totaling 3 people. The technique used in finding participants was purposive sampling. The research sample took into account certain factors to make the data obtained more representative (Sugiyono, 2014). Based on the research conducted, the criteria for informants among teenage girls who experienced fatherlessness in Saentis Village, Percut Sei Tuan District can be identified. Proceedings of the Indonesian Psychology Student Conference, vol. 4, pp. 88-98. Data collection used semi-structured interviews and was analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a data analysis technique used in qualitative research, in which researchers collect descriptive data to identify patterns and themes within the collected data (Braun et al., 2018).

The factors of fatherlessness vary at each age stage of the abandoned child, particularly in adolescence. Subjective well-being is a predictor of an individual's quality of life; it influences their success in various aspects of life. The widespread phenomenon of fatherlessness is due, among other things, to cultural factors that seem to limit the roles of fathers and mothers within the family. It is important to examine this phenomenon from the perspective of adolescents' subjective well-being to gain a comprehensive picture of subjective well-being and, in essence, to anticipate the absence of a father's role in the family during this crucial period for adolescents. Therefore, the authors are interested in examining the subjective well-being of fatherless adolescents (Diener et al., 2018).

Results and Discussions

Based on the characteristics of the subjects and the typology of paternal parenting, this study explores the life experiences of three subjects with different father-child relationship backgrounds in

Saentis Village, Percut Sei Tuan District. Through a phenomenological approach, it was found that adolescents' subjective well-being is not only determined by the physical presence of the father, but more so by the functional quality and stability of the role they play. The factors influencing *fatherlessness* on the psychological well-being of children experiencing *fatherlessness* in working-class families in Saentis Village show a complex pattern. Based on the results of in-depth interviews and phenomenological observations, the psychological distortions experienced by informants are triggered not only by the loss of emotional closeness but also by limited economic and structural capital. To map how these structural and psychological factors mutually influence informants' mental states across developmental phases, the following synthesis matrix is based on Erik Erikson's psychosocial developmental theory.

Table 1. Informant Phenomenological Comparison Factor Matrix

Informant category	Structural factors (external / working-class environment)	Psychological factors (internal / child's mental condition)	Manifestations at the Erikson stage
Informant 1 (Z, 14 years old) <i>Early adolescence</i>	Father's time constraints & job uncertainty: father's profession as a construction worker with an uncertain work system triggers domestic stress.	Attachment crisis : the emergence of chronic anxiety and feelings of insecurity towards authority figures.	<i>Identity vs. Role confusion</i> (initial phase)
Informant 2 (A, 16 years old) <i>Middle teens</i>	Acute financial deficit after divorce and death: father died after a previous divorce when subject was in 3rd grade. Mother shouldered a double burden.	Gender identity confusion: loss of inner compass to emulate adult male <i>gender-role models</i> .	<i>Identity vs. Role confusion</i> (peak phase)
Informant 3 (T, 19 years old) <i>Early adulthood</i>	Demands for economic succession due to aging parents: father is 65 years old, works as an electrician on call who is not tied to a company.	Accumulation of disappointment (<i>resentment</i>): the presence of emotional resentment over past instability that hinders trust in others (<i>trust issues</i>).	<i>Intimacy vs. Isolation</i>

1. Structural and Psychological Factors in Early Adolescence: Informant Z (14 Years)

In the early adolescent phase, the psychological dynamics of fatherless children are clearly depicted by the life experience of Informant 1 (Z, 14 years old). Structurally, Z grew up in the vortex of economic uncertainty of the working class, where his father worked as a construction laborer with an uncertain daily work system, sometimes working when there was a project, and often unemployed when

there were no orders. This condition gave rise to the Father's Time Limitation Factor and psychological pressure in the domestic sphere. The physical demands of construction work meant that the father's time and energy were spent outside the home, so daily interaction with Z was minimal. This psychological absence *stimulates the emergence of the Attachment Crisis Factor* within Z. Humanistically, Z feels the absence of a protective figure; he finds his father a foreign figure and emotionally difficult to reach. According to Erik Erikson's psychosocial perspective, 14-year-olds are at the beginning of the Identity vs. Role Confusion stage. The lack of confirmation of affection and attachment from the father figure in this critical phase manifests in the emergence of persistent *anxiety* and feelings of insecurity. Z tends to doubt his own abilities and feels anxious around authority figures outside the home because he never had a solid foundation of trust with his own father.

2. Structural and Psychological Factors in Middle Adolescence: Informant A (16 Years)

Entering the middle adolescence phase, psychological distortion due to fatherlessness experienced a more severe escalation, as experienced by Informant 2 (16 years old). The structural conditions underlying A's life were layered blows: his parents' divorce when he was in 3rd grade of elementary school, followed by the death of his father several years later. This reality triggered an Acute Financial Deficit Factor in his family. The complete absence of income from his father after the divorce forced his mother to bear a double burden as the sole breadwinner and caregiver, which in turn created a total parenting deficit *for A*.

Psychologically, the accumulation of these losses forms the Male Identity Confusion Factor in A. Losing his father at elementary school age, a time when boys need a central figure to internalize the values of masculinity, makes A lose his inner compass to imitate gender roles (*gender role models*). A experiences grief that is not finished (*unresolved grief*) mixed with confusion about direction in life. The manifestation of this condition occurs during the peak phase of *the Identity vs. Role Confusion stage*. Without guidance, supervision, and firmness from a father, A struggles to find his identity amidst the storm of adolescence. He is prone to experiencing an identity crisis, feeling adrift without direction, and its manifestation appears in the form of deep longing *mixed* with a feeling of powerlessness in expressing his masculine role in the social environment of Saentis Village.

3. Structural and Psychological Factors in Early Adulthood: Informant T (19 Years)

The long-term impact of fatherless parenting in a working-class environment was clearly crystallized in early adulthood, as reflected in the life of Informant 3 (T, 19 years old). Structurally, T faced the reality of aging parents, with his father now in his twilight years (around 65 years old) and working only as an on-call electrician not tied to a company. Fluctuating income and his father's weakening physical condition triggered the Demand for Economic Succession Factor. At just 19, T, whether willingly or unwillingly, had to take over as the primary breadwinner and live independently to meet the household's increasingly pressing financial needs. Although T appears to be a strong and independent figure on the outside, his inner space harbors a factor of accumulated disappointment (resentment). There is a hidden psychological wound resulting from a childhood and adolescence spent in the shadow of his father's functional instability. His father's aging and the early independence forced by this economic situation gave rise to a feeling of suffocation, in which T feels he has lost his youth to shoulder responsibilities that should fall to his parents (parentification).

Within Erikson's theory, T is currently in the Intimacy vs. Isolation stage. This accumulation of past disappointments has morphed into acute trust issues. T tends to withdraw from deep emotional attachments and limit intimate interpersonal relationships for fear of future abandonment or similar

disappointments. T's demonstrated economic independence is essentially a coping mechanism (defense mechanism) to protect himself from mental fragility and social isolation that threaten his subjective well-being. After successfully mapping the variations in the structural and psychological factors of the three informants above, the main practical contribution of this study is the importance of designing a Comprehensive Contextual-Based Guidance and Counseling Intervention Design. This phenomenological finding proves that psychological treatment for children experiencing fatherlessness in working-class families in Saentis Village cannot be the same, but must be specifically adjusted based on the urgency of needs at each stage of their psychosocial transition.

Based on these risk factors, the reconstruction of guidance and counseling services in the field is directed at three concrete forms of treatment. First, for the early adolescent phase, intervention should focus on anxiety reduction counseling to restore the child's attachment crisis and sense of security. Second, for the middle adolescent phase (as in the case of Informant A), practical contributions are realized through grief counseling and group guidance to heal the trauma of loss due to the death of the father while guiding their search for identity. Finally, in the early adult phase, implementing narrative counseling (healing resentment) is recommended to address the accumulation of past disappointments and prevent social isolation in interpersonal relationships.

The findings of this study demonstrate that fatherlessness among working-class families is a multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be understood solely from the absence of a father's physical presence. The psychological impact experienced by children is strongly influenced by the quality of paternal functions, including emotional availability, guidance, protection, and involvement in daily development. Therefore, fatherlessness in this study refers to the disruption of paternal roles rather than only the absence of a father figure. This finding supports Lamb's (2010) perspective that father involvement plays an essential role in children's emotional, social, and psychological development because children require meaningful interaction and emotional support from fathers, not merely economic contribution.

The study reveals that structural factors within working-class families significantly shape children's psychological experiences of fatherlessness. Economic instability, uncertain employment, and family pressures create conditions where fathers have limited capacity to perform emotional and developmental roles. In this context, fatherlessness becomes interconnected with socioeconomic vulnerability. This finding expands previous discussions on fatherlessness by showing that paternal absence is often produced by structural conditions, where fathers may physically exist but are unable to provide consistent emotional involvement. Hedo (2020) explains that father involvement includes emotional engagement, responsibility, and active participation in children's lives, meaning that reduced involvement may affect children's emotional security.

From a developmental perspective, the psychological consequences of fatherlessness vary according to the child's developmental stage. The experiences of early adolescents in this study indicate that the lack of stable paternal attachment may influence the development of trust and self-security. This condition is particularly significant because adolescence represents a period of identity construction. According to Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory, adolescents in the stage of Identity vs. Role Confusion require social support and validation from significant figures to develop a stable identity. The absence of such support may contribute to insecurity, confusion, and difficulties in understanding oneself and one's social position.

The findings among middle adolescents further illustrate that fatherlessness may affect identity development through the loss of paternal role models. During adolescence, children begin to seek examples of adult roles and values as part of the process of forming their identity. When paternal figures

disappear due to divorce or death, adolescents may experience emotional loss and difficulties in constructing their self-concept. This is consistent with Ashari (2017), who states that fatherlessness can influence children's psychological development, including emotional stability, self-confidence, and personality formation. In addition, unresolved emotional experiences related to paternal loss may influence adolescents' subjective evaluation of their own well-being. Diener et al. (2018) emphasize that subjective well-being is influenced by emotional experiences and the quality of interpersonal relationships, meaning that disrupted family relationships can affect children's psychological satisfaction.

The impact of fatherlessness also continues into early adulthood, particularly in the formation of interpersonal relationships. This study indicates that some individuals develop independence as a response to family demands, but this adaptation may be accompanied by emotional difficulties such as distrust and avoidance of close relationships. Such findings suggest that external resilience does not always represent complete psychological adjustment. In Erikson's (1968) stage of Intimacy vs. Isolation, individuals are expected to develop meaningful emotional relationships; however, previous experiences of instability may influence their ability to establish intimacy with others. This finding is supported by Junaidin et al. (2023), who found that fatherless experiences may contribute to difficulties in forming emotional relationships due to fears of rejection or abandonment.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that fatherlessness should be viewed as a developmental process rather than a single event. The psychological effects are accumulated through continuous experiences of emotional distance, economic pressure, and unmet relational needs. This explains why each informant showed different psychological manifestations despite experiencing the same general condition of fatherlessness. The difference is influenced by age, family structure, and the availability of alternative sources of support. Santrock (2013) highlights that adolescent development is strongly affected by family relationships and environmental support systems.

Overall, this study emphasizes that interventions for fatherless children should not apply a uniform approach. Support strategies need to consider developmental stages and specific psychological needs. Early adolescents require interventions that strengthen emotional security and attachment, middle adolescents need support in identity development and emotional recovery, while young adults may require assistance in processing past experiences and building healthier interpersonal relationships. These findings reinforce previous research showing that positive parental involvement contributes to children's self-esteem and psychological adjustment (Auni, 2017; Salsabila et al., 2020).

Conclusion

This study concludes that fatherlessness among working-class families is a complex condition influenced by the interaction between structural factors, such as economic limitations, unstable employment, divorce, and loss of paternal roles, as well as psychological factors affecting children's mental health. Fatherlessness is not merely defined as the physical absence of a father but also the lack of emotional involvement, guidance, protection, and meaningful interaction in children's development. The findings reveal that children experiencing fatherlessness may face various psychological impacts, including anxiety, insecurity, attachment crises, identity confusion, unresolved grief, and difficulties in building interpersonal relationships. Based on Erikson's psychosocial development theory, these impacts vary across developmental stages, where adolescents tend to experience challenges in identity formation, while early adults may experience difficulties in establishing intimacy and trust. Therefore, strengthening father involvement and developing contextual guidance and counseling interventions

based on children's developmental needs are essential to support the psychological well-being of children experiencing fatherlessness.

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