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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Silent Struggle: Early Paternal Loss and Its Influence on Adolescent Self-Esteem

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Abstract

Over the years, children who do not have a father figure has become a widely discussed topic. The absence of a father figure can either be due to death, criminal punishment, neglect, or limited amount of contact such as divorce. Since self-esteem among adolescents who lost their father figure at a certain age isn't studied enough, this research's participants will focus on adolescents who lost their father figure since an early age, precisely between the ages of 0 – 6 years. A qualitative approach and phenomenological method were used with the aim of presenting a picture and explanation of the phenomenon, and due to the specific criteria's, purposive sampling technique would be most ideal to obtain participants for this research. Results from this study emerged four major themes; struggles of fatherlessness (Challenges and struggles that occur from losing one's father figure from a young age, including identity dilemma, the feeling of missing paternal attachment, and the struggles of viewing oneself being different and/or inferior than people in general); acceptance (The process of accepting one's condition that differentiates them from other people in general as a coping method for the participants); independence and control (The dynamics that participants go through regarding control over their personal lives due to the dominance and expectations of their mother after paternal loss); and self-assurance (How participants deal with the challenges from paternal loss). The results also support the three dimensions of social self-esteem theory by Stets and Burke.

Keywords: Adolescence, Adolescent, Early Paternal Loss, Attachment, Fatherless, Fatherlessness, Father Figure, Father Loss, Identity, Self-Esteem

INTRODUCTION

Losing one's father has never been something one can control. One day he exists, the next a chain of expected or unexpected events robs him of one's life temporarily, or forever. In Indonesia, more children are growing up without their biological fathers as years go by. The national social economic survey back in 2009 found that the percentage of children aged 0 – 17 years living who live only with their biological mother was 5,61%. In 2018, the percentage of children with such characteristics was 8,34% (Windiarto et al., 2019). In 2021, according to CNN Indonesia, Indonesia is included in the group of countries with a fairly high rate of fatherlessness, which was 9%. This just shows that in a span of 13 years from 2008 to 2021, fatherlessness somehow found itself a growing phenomenon.

Defining the concept of father absence may cover a variety of circumstances (East et al., 2006), but to put it simply, it is the absence of a father figure throughout a span of one's life. A father can be fully absent due to death, incarceration, neglect, or has limited amount of contact with the child (partially absent) due to separation by divorce or not being married to the mother. Fathers have various significant roles in children's development in terms of role models, discipline, and responsibility, providing a sense of security and courage in facing the world, fulfilling daily and special needs, and being a friend and protector (Wibiharto et al., 2021). A father who does not fulfill his role and responsibilities towards his child can cause conflicts within their development, including the increasing risk of gender identity confusion, anxiety, depression, loneliness, and affecting their self-control and self-esteem (Luo et al., 2012; Saefudin, Lisnawati, & Sriwiyanti, 2021; Wibiharto et al., 2021). Individuals who feel the absence of father figure often may struggle with low self-esteem, feeling of anger and shame, stemming from their perceptions of being negatively different (Wibiharto et al., 2021). Fatherless young men who grew up in lower SES families were prone to the risks of failing school due to lacking adequate social and educational skills and capacity (James, 2012), which might stem from the single parent's limited income and time to effectively

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monitor and engage in their child's schooling. Lower SES in childhood pose a moderate risk of future economic-burden behaviors like smoking and crimes (Caspi et al., 2017).

An individual's transition to adulthood is marked by the rapid development within cognitive, biological, social, and emotional aspects. This period in life presents numerous challenges as they navigate increased evaluation, decision-making, commitment and the quest to find one's place in the world. Based on a study in Santrock (2014), self-esteem declines during both adolescence and early adulthood (18 – 22 years old). A study by Chung et al. (2017) resulted in similar findings regarding the decreasing average level of self-esteem in adolescence. This raises questions on why does self-esteem play such a big role during teenage development that after all these years, it still becomes a relevant focus of research.

Rosenberg (1965) studied self-esteem and came up with brief descriptions regarding different levels of self-esteem in an individual. An individual with relatively high self-esteem feels valued and accepts themselves as who they are, does not seek validation and admiration from others towards them or feel superior to others. Self-acceptance in individuals with high self-esteem never easily resigns themselves to their shortcomings; they also show hope and effort to overcome these shortcomings. Conversely, a low self-esteem individual experiences self-rejection, dissatisfaction with themselves, and self-contempt, leading them to not value their own self-image and expecting the opposite. Erikson's (1950) identity development, more specifically during the "identity vs confusion" stage entails how an individual should tackle the challenge of rising confusion and insecurities of whether they fit into the society. Later research by Crocetti (2017) who aims to further expand Erikson's psychosocial theory and Marcia's identity status paradigm also emphasizes the link between high concept clarity and self-esteem to one's quest for identity, and psychosocial functioning. Within this research's context, adolescents also face an additional challenge of growing up with the absence of a father figure, which brings us to the question of how its effect on paternal attachment will affect their developing self-esteem, considering how early years of attachment security with parents, including the father figure predicts self-esteem is prove to predict self-esteem (Pinto et al., 2015).

Self-esteem is influenced by a variety of factors, one of which, according to multiple findings, is the family environment (Deshpande & Chabriya, 2013; Krauss et al., 2020; Wendi & Kusmiati, 2022). Adolescents who perceive the feeling of acceptance from their parents have increased self-esteem (Deshpande & Chabriya, 2013). According to a study by Krauss et al. (2020), self-esteem is positively influenced by parental warmth, low maternal depression, economic security, and the presence of a father in the family household. Thus, children, more commonly daughters, who grew up with their father figure absent especially from a young age were more at risk of low self-esteem (Luo et al., 2012).

Self-esteem impacts adolescent mental health by influencing the risk of anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and improving quality of life (Luo et al., 2012; Sowislo & Orth, 2013; Orth et al., 2014; Steiger et al., 2014; Kollndorfer et al., 2017; Morksnes & Reidunsdatter, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2019). According to various research, high self-esteem is a predictor of future orientation and commitment success, and well-being in areas such as social relationships, work, and health (Orth & Robins, 2014; Preska & Wahyuni, 2017; Albert Sznitman et al., 2019), while the consequences of low self-esteem can have developmental consequences towards adulthood, ranging from low cognitive achievement, behavioral problems, confusion about sexual identity, difficulties in commitment and decision-making, high susceptibility to social media addiction and suicide ideation, and low success-rate in social relationships (Andreassen et al., 2017; Nguyen et al., 2019; Albert Sznitman et al., 2019; Harris & Orth, 2020). Additional research found that self-esteem is fundamental component to self-awareness (Minev et al., 2018), and is associated with self-acceptance, which plays a role in improving an individual's psychological well-being (Maclnnes, 2006; Snyder et al., 2021).

Over the years, numerous studies have explored the impact of father-absence on self-esteem. Hendricks et al. (2005) found a small, yet significant difference regarding self-esteem in students who lived without a father figure being lower than the ones who lived with complete parents. Subsequent research by Kevorkian (2010) found no significance between the presence of a father and self-esteem in children. Research by Luo et al. (2012) again found that adolescents living without a father had lower levels of self-esteem. Then a study by Fields (2014) found no significant effect between the absence of a father and self-esteem in African-American adolescents. Magangi (2018) again found that the level of self-esteem of adolescents who did not have a father figure was lower than adolescents who lived with complete parents. A study by Frazier and Cowan (2020) that explored attachment style and self-esteem in women aged 25-55 years also found that lack of father involvement was related to how they viewed themselves (self-worth) which could then affect their self-esteem. Another study by Krauss et al. (2020) exploring environmental factors in adolescent self-esteem also found that adolescent self-esteem was positively predicted by the family environment, one of which was the presence of a father in the family.

Various studies have also shown the impact of father absence specifically on a particular gender. Female adolescents who grew up without a father figure are more likely to face challenges in heterosexual romantic relationships. They tend to develop anxious attachment styles, characterized by constant need of attention and validation from men, more commonly recognized as "daddy issues", which higher the likelihood of experiencing early sexual development, and higher level of sexual behavior involvement (La Guardia, Nelson, & Lertora, 2014; Castetter, 2020). Meanwhile, a father's role in male adolescent's gender identity development and self-confidence is deemed crucial, otherwise it may result in confusion and identity dilemmas (Majid & Abdullah, 2024).

Studies in the past (Hendricks et al., 2005; Kevorkian, 2010; Luo et al., 2012; Fields, 2014; Magangi, 2018; Frazier & Cowan, 2020; Krauss et al, 2020) highlight inconsistencies in the relationship between fatherlessness and self-esteem. As noted by the limitations in Hendricks et al. (2005) and Frazier and Cowan (2020), they did not account for the age at which participants lost their father figures, considering the timing of father absence could bring different results to adolescents' self-esteem (Luo et al., 2012). These studies, conducted in diverse countries such as China, the United States, and Africa, face limitations in global generalization due to cultural differences in perceptions of fatherhood. Given these limitations, this study aims to contribute to the research landscape by exploring self-esteem development in Indonesian adolescents who have lost their fathers at an early age.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participant characteristics and research design

This study focuses on late adolescents aged 18-22 years old according to Santrock (2014), who lost their father figure between ages of 0-6 years, or early childhood stage (Santrock, 2014). Thus, anyone who are considered outside of the age requirements cannot be included as a study participant. A qualitative approach with a phenomenological method is utilized with the aim to provide explanations and insights into a social phenomenon as described by research participants, addressing the "why" and "how" questions of said occurrence, how they process and perceive such experience (Hancock, 1998; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Essentially a study of phenomena, this method offers a deep understanding of a subject matter. This focuses on a specific phenomenon of the participants' life, compared to other methods. Said phenomenon is the absence of father figure since early childhood, and the results of this study would then represent the individuals who lived through similar experiences.

Objectivity was ensured through prior research of qualitative study methods and approaches, data triangulations, and consulting with supervising lecturer during the process of study. The data validity was assessed through a series of triangulation techniques. In qualitative research, data is deemed credible if similarities between the researcher's report and participants' experiences are detected. The credibility test includes techniques such as extended observations, increased persistence, data triangulation through scientific reference materials, and member check. Member check involves verifying the acquired data from participants to ensure it correctly represents the intended source (Sugiyono, 2015). This process helps determine how well the data aligns with the participants' information provided.

A series of procedures are followed to gain research credibility. Initially, research participants undergo interviews to obtain initial data. In subsequent interviews, researchers will clarify and align their perceptions between themselves with the participants. If participants agree with the findings, the data will be deemed credible for further analysis. If there is a disagreement with the acquired data, adjustments will be made to match their data's.

If the data found is then agreed upon by the participants, then the data is declared valid so that it is credible for research data. However, if the data found by researchers with various interpretations is not agreed upon by the participants, then the researchers must change the findings and must adjust according to the data provided by the participants. In this study, researchers prepared a list of questions and in-depth participant interviews and clarified the truth of the data. Various data and information obtained are equipped with observation documentation. Aside from interviews, additional data collection is done through observation documentation.

Data transferability refers to the degree of accuracy of research results to which it can be applied to the population studied. The transferability data is considered met if readers can understand the research findings. Therefore, the research report will be organized clearly to avoid confusing the readers.

Dependability refers to the research's reliability. This helps ensure the accuracy of data from the fieldwork conducted. Dependability includes how reliable the research is. The data obtained is in accordance with the fieldwork carried out. To ensure the dependability of this research, an audit was conducted by the supervising lecturer to monitor the research process from determining the topic, entering the field, determining data sources, data analysis, data validity testing, to finally drawing conclusions. To further ensure dependability, a supervising lecturer audit the entire process-from topic selection, fieldwork entry, data source determination to data analysis, validity testing, and drawing conclusions.

Sampling procedures

This study utilizes the purposive sampling technique, which translates to a procedure of gathering data source with specific criteria's already set up in advance (Sugiyono, 2015). The procedure execution is held in Salatiga city, Central Java, Indonesia.

Sample size, power, and precision

The data collection instrument in this study was an interview guide created by the researcher. It consists of four sections; participant background (to build rapport and understand participants better), social-worth, self-efficacy, and authenticity. The interview guide was developed using references from the self-esteem aspects outlined by Stets and Burke (2014). This study has two participants, both their names changed into pseudonyms to maintain privacy. Despite the small sample size, the result of this study is believed to remain meaningful considering both participants do not have remarried parents, whereas the other participant candidates either do not meet the age requirements, or have their parents remarried at certain points within their childhood. With the limited amount of time, both participants are still able to provide useful insights into this study.

Table 1. Participants Profile

No.	Name	Age	Age of Father Loss	Ethnicity
1	Mario	22	2	Indonesian (Javanese)
2	Emily	21	6	Indonesian (Makassarese)

Measures

Data collection was conducted face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, using open-ended inquiries through a pre-developed interview guide to suitable participants. Interviews were held in a semi-structured manner to provide participants with a safe space to freely express themselves. This approach allowed for a deeper exploration into their experiences and phenomena (Hancock, 1998).

Data analysis

The interview results will be preserved in a transcript or verbatim for analysis. A thematic analysis technique will be utilized for this research, which focuses more on the content of the participants' statements rather than their manner of expressing them (Howitt, 2010). The stages of thematic analysis include transcription, analytical efforts, and theme identification. In thematic analysis, significant data's will be highlighted, facilitating further discussions and conclusions that can be drawn. The themes were

determined through meticulous and comprehensive analysis of the interview transcripts with participants. Data points that were significant would then be highlighted and extracted with the guidance of a supervising lecturer. The interview transcripts were collected in a single Microsoft Excel file, where the analysis was also carried out.

RESULT

Through the thematic analysis of obtained data's, several themes emerged that help explain the findings.

1. Struggles Of Fatherlessness

The absence of a father figure has its impact and influence on children's growth and development, particularly during adolescence. The struggles they faced are distinct from those of the same age with complete parental figures.

1.1. Identity Dilemma

Identity Loss and Confusion

Without a father figure in the family to exemplify how a man should behave and act, Mario struggles in finding his identity as a man journeying through adolescence with the company of his mother and older sisters. Mario's father, whom he saw as the source of knowledge and introduction to the outside world, left him when he was still two and a half years old. Although his eldest sibling being a boy, their relationship did not have a significant influence, due to lack of interaction time, and his eldest brother's unwillingness to provide the expected example of masculinity.

> "*The relationship with my older brother is really bad because we've never seen each other anymore. We only met back when... (I was in) 6th grade to 2nd year of junior high school. It was only during those three years when I asked for, let's say responsibility. His responsibility as the only male family member except myself, I wanted him show more of his fatherly side because of his quite mature age at that time for me to learn from him... like what are the things I can take for myself, to prepare for my future, about being a man. But it turned out he didn't that either.*" (Mario)
> "*If we had parents... we would typically understand the world through them. But since I'm a boy, and I lost... well, I lost that male figure, and I was unable to get that guidance. In the end, I had to find my identity on my own.*" (Mario)
> "*... especially during that transitional phase from childhood to adolescence, and from adolescence to adulthood. During those times (I was) completely unaccompanied, and I didn't know how to navigate through.*" (Mario)

Given the unfavorable situation, Mario ultimately embarked on his quest for identity on his own, relying on his observation towards his mother's and older sisters' behaviors, attitudes, and ways of thinking. Despite this, Mario recognized that what he learned from his sisters did not align with the traditional notions of masculinity, making him question whether he should emulate their behavior. This only added to his dilemma in searching and developing his identity as a man.

> "*(I) don't like getting into fights and such, and I tend to appear more effeminate, probably because I observed and mimicked the feminine traits from my older sisters. I wouldn't say they taught me, but they often displayed those traits in front of me. ... . I was completely clueless regarding my identity and whether I should continue learning from them or not, ...*" (Mario)
> "*So it was like... how do you become a man... when all you had to teach you were women.*" (Mario)

Feeling of Inferiority to Other Men

Mario's dilemma regarding his identity gave rise to a feeling of inferiority towards other men around him. Growing up observing and imitating his mother and older sisters. Mario realized that he often displayed his feminine side more than his masculine side in social settings, a complete opposite from the stereotypical strong and brave man he knew.

> "*... , it felt like from elementary to high school, I felt inferior because I had no idea of my own identity, and there was no father figure to help either...*" (Mario)
> "*So yeah... it's true that... you could say, I lacked masculinity, and more often displayed feminine traits.*" (Mario)
> "*There are definitely some apparent feminine aspects from me that I mimicked at that time.*" (Mario)

Despite having a relatively large body, he remained fearful of physical confrontation, while other men in his hometown were publicly shown as strong and resilient. This inferiority complex made it difficult for him to interact socially. His desire to interact and socialize with male friends was hindered by the fear of being pulled into a series of negative behaviors, while his wish to interact with female friends was impeded by the fear of being judged by the surrounding community.

> "*... . Perhaps the issue was more of a... (I) seem softer than the other boys. Growing up in Sulawesi, where the boys are typically taught to be strong, ones who don't go down easily when hit, for example.*" (Mario)
> "*In the end, my body has always been soft... I never became... until now my body has never been strong. Big in size but will always get scared if someone tries to hit me.*" (Mario)

Facing Criticism for Diverging from Masculine Norms

Having spent most of his upbringing surrounded by his older sisters, thus leading to him observing and mimicking their behaviors, Mario's feminine side became more prominent. As a result, he often received criticism from those around him, particularly from other men. They called him 'weak' due to his aversion to physical altercations, and often more feminine forms of self-expression while the cultural understanding of men coming from where he lived were ones to not hesitate on getting into more physical forms of confrontation when feeling threatened.

> "*That's why it feels like my identity... well, my identity became increasingly clouded because the the environment... the people around me always questioned, 'Why are you so weak, Mario?' By*

'weak' they meant my dislike towards fights, and things like that." (Mario)

1.2. Absence of Father Figure within the Family

Lack of Paternal Attachment

Interviews with Mario and Emily revealed that losing their fathers from such a young age led to a lack of attachment to a father figure. In Mario's case, his older brother, who could have provided a similar sense of attachment, was deemed incapable. Journeying through his teenage years surrounded by attention and love solely from female family members only intensified his need for a father figure.

"... , I truly lost a father figure. My brother wasn't there to replace that feeling of (fatherly) attachment..." (Mario)
"... , there was no father figure to help me understand what life is all about... especially during that transitional phase from childhood to adolescence, and from adolescence to adulthood. During those times (I was) completely unaccompanied, and I didn't know how to navigate through." (Mario)

Emily lost her sense of attachment to a father figure during her school years. She observed how her friends back in elementary school had both parents attending their graduation ceremony, fathers picking up and dropping off schoolmates in junior high, and colleagues inviting both parents to college events and upcoming graduation. Despite her mother's efforts to fulfill both parental roles, she still felt a sense of loneliness due to differences between her family's situation and her peers with complete parents.

"I realized that my friends had complete parents, whereas I... well, with my mom only still felt complete, though in terms of roles. Both parents' roles were present. But it still felt lacking because there was no father figure..." (Emily)
"... Honestly, yes, it felt like, oh... they have complete families, it's fun, it's lively. While I only had my brother... and even he was often away for work. My mom also had other commitments, so she couldn't fully be there for me." (Emily)

The Need for Paternal Attachment

Both Mario and Emily expressed that they still need the presence of a father figure in their lives. Mario, who grew up with only the attention and affection of his mother and older sisters, desires also similar things from a male figure. Emily, while she acknowledges her mother's dedication to fulfill both parental roles in the family, still values the importance of a father's firmness and decision-making.

"... And in the end, I was only filled with love from women. When I grew up... when I became an adult and felt the need for a father's affection, I thought, why not? It continues to this day..." (Mario)
"... , whereas I... well, with my mom only still felt complete, though in terms of roles. Both parents' roles were present. But it still felt lacking because there was no father figure..." (Emily)

"... little things like making decisions... for example, asking my mom's opinion or only relying on her felt insufficient. It's like... they seem to waver in their answers because, in my opinion, men tend to be more decisive... giving direct answers like A is A, B is B. They make precise decisions." (Emily)

1.3. The Search for an Alternative Father Figure's Replacement

Finding an Alternative Father Figure's

The absence of a father figure can drive an individual to seek a substitute, either consciously or unconsciously. Mario's need for a presence of a father figure was met during high school, where a male schoolmate was willing to provide support through advice and guidance in navigating his identity dilemmas and feelings of inferiority. To this day, they still maintain a strong relationship, with Mario viewing him as a role model and a source of admiration.

"...I stopped looking for that figure during high school. At that time, I found someone who seemed willing and able to be a figure that could teach me... teach me how to be a man. Since then, and even up to now, he remains one of my role models... someone who gives advice and guidance on various things that can build and direct me." (Mario)

Failing to Find an Alternative Father Figure

Unlike Mario, Emily believes there won't be anyone in the world who can fully replace father figure. She is unwilling to burden her boyfriend with this role, fearing objection and reluctance. Her older brother, she considers a closest substitute for a father figure, as he is protective and attentive to her needs. However, that doesn't make her believe he will replace her father due to inherent differences.

"Thank God, I got my older brother. He nurtures me, picks me up and drops me off, and whenever I have something going on, I tell him about it. He always responds like, 'Oh, you should do this, sis' 'Oh, this and that, sis.' It's like that." (Emily)
"More or less... it can be substituted, somewhat healed, even though not completely. After all, looking for someone else is not possible." (Emily)
"In the end, it's a different concept." (Emily)

2. Acceptance

2.1. Acceptance of One Self's Difference

A difference is identified in how Mario and Emily's approach in accepting their current situations for having lost their fathers from a young age, which distinguishes them from their peers.

Support from External Figures

Having lost his father at an early age and growing up with only female family members left in the household, Mario faced identity dilemmas and feelings of inferiority towards other men. Finding someone willing to serve as a father figure in his high school years was crucial for his self-acceptance, whether he realized it or not. With this

support, Mario was able to start building up self-confidence as a man, embracing his differences that had once contributed to his inferiority.

"... . It goes back to how I grew up... in a family where the only role models I had... were all women..."(Mario)
"... . I feel that this becomes of the reasons why I am different from most men."(Mario)

In contrast, Emily's family faced rejection from her father's side after his passing, as they believed she had already received their share of inheritance yet was still seeking financial help. Emily struggled to understand their rejection considering the man they had lost was also an important figure in her life and household. However, her mother taught her that, despite the rejection, it was important to continue doing good and accept the situation with an open heart and mind.

"Well... I mainly learned from my mom. She would face things with a smile and say, 'If you end up struggling, you can ask for money here.' 'If we're able to give, we'll give, if not, then we won't.' She meant to show that what people say doesn't matter, so they don't know the truth and to keep things calm."(Emily)

Self-Acceptance

Emily considers her journey to accept the loss of her father at an early age as quite the challenge. Listening to her friends' experiences with their fathers and recalling her own memories with her father, she realized she could never expect the same. Emily holds onto the belief that a father will never replaceable, hence she was hesitant to fully rely on another male figure.

"... Like when I see my friends, and my siblings often share stories like, 'Dad used to pick me up from school,' and then, 'You've never been picked up by Dad, right?' It's like that more often. It made me feel, 'Oh, I don't have a dad, so I can't expect that.' Eventually, I felt like, 'Emm, it's okay if they can't pick me up. I can be picked up by my siblings.'..."(Emily)
"... well, if it's just my mom, so what? Why does it have to be both parents if my mom can handle it? ..."(Emily)

She copes with the absence of a father figure by giving herself comfort through positive thoughts and drawing support from her remaining family members.

"We have to accept it as what it is; there's nothing we can do about it."(*Emily*)
"We have to be happy. There's no other option."(Emily)
"It's with a heavy heart."(Emily)
"It would be hypocritical to say that I have fully accepted it, hehe. So, for me personally, it's still heavy." (Emily)

3. Independence And Control

Research participants faced challenges and dynamics that are less likely to be experienced than other individuals with a present father figure in their family. The dynamics pertain to personal control of their lives and future endeavors.

3.1. Maternal Dominance and Control

Significant Changes in Mother's Character and Control after Father's Passing

Both Mario and Emily observed and experienced changer in their mothers' behavior and levels of control after the loss of their father. Mario heard from his older siblings how his father had always prohibited them from going out alone, while his mother was more lenient. However, his mother nowadays seems to have adopted a stricter approach, contrary to her previous nature.

"... Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that my father... before he was gone, er... (he) was a very strict parent, strictly forbidding the family from going anywhere alone."(Mario)
"... if I see it, it actually contradicts my mother's nature. So, my father's traits were passed down to my mother, but my mother used to be the opposite of that..." (Mario)

Similarly, Emily's older siblings recalled her mother being less restrictive, tending to offer advice and her own views of some decisions. After her father's death, however, her mother became more controlling, making decisions for Emily's schooling and college choices without considering Emily's wishes, as she felt the need to fulfill both parental roles.

"... she used to merely gave advice and informed about the side effects of each choice. But when my father was gone, it reached its peak, and until now, maybe because she felt she had to play a double role (as a single parent) there."(Emily)
"... My mother used to handle everything. Including my school choices and even my college choices."(Emily)

Interference due to Hopes and Expectation in Determining One's Future

Both Mario and Emily felt that their mother had a greater influence on their future decisions after their father's passing. Mario believed there was some longing and hope from his mother for him to bring back the level of comfortability his father once brought with his respected job, expecting her children to restore the family's former standing. Given that Mario had not yet started working, and his mother kept seeing him as a reflection of his father in both appearance and character, additional expectations were burdened on him. For Emily, being the youngest child, her mother did not want her to move far from home, especially since her siblings already lived with their respective spouses. This led to significant maternal intervention in decisions such as where to study and future career choices.

"...Perhaps my mom felt that she had already enjoyed that, and now she might want to relive the family's golden days." (Mario)
"(She) wants her children to continue... to continue showing that we can still be successful..." (Mario)
"...I look the most like my father. I'm often told, 'You look just like your father,' from my face to my traits. So, she places her hopes that her youngest child can bring the family back to its former glory." (Mario)

"So yes, there's a connection with losing a father, like having more expectations... more (past) reality turned into expectations placed on her children." (Mario)
"For the future... right now, honestly, there's still some involvement from my mom. Because, once again, I'm the youngest, and my mom doesn't like it if the youngest goes too far away from her." (Emily)

3.2. Ability and Desire to Take Control of One's Life

Desire to Independently Decide on Self's Future

Over time, Mario realized his dislike for his mother's constant control and interference for his personal choices. He began to assert his desire to make his own choices, though not as rebellious as his siblings did. On the other hand, Emily realized that she could not continue to rely on her mother financially as she aged, despite her unwavering willingness.

"... It's more because of seeing my siblings. Back then, after my father was gone, they used to rebel, but in the wrong way, in my opinion. Like, they had to be mischievous and all that. At that time, I said, I don't want to be like this. Hmm, I don't want to be like my siblings, but should I follow my mom's wishes? ..." (Mario)
"...Even though my mom fully helps to pay, it still doesn't feel right..."(Emily)
"And I also think that my mom is getting older, right? She can't keep providing me financially forever..." (Emily)

Efforts Made to Gain Independence

Both Mario and Emily didn't merely stop on desiring for independence, they took their own steps to achieve it. One example was when Mario began to assert his personal views and choices by convincing his mother that his selected university was the best option for him.

"... . When it comes to having choices, I had to... my mom once said to choose this university here, here, and here. I told her that my abilities don't reach that level. If I choose for myself, I will choose according to my capabilities, and I will make mom proud. In the end, she said, 'Well, if that's your choice, then so be it.' Something like that."(Mario)

Emily, who previously adhered strictly to her mother's direction and choices, began to discuss and challenge her mother's opinions when she had different preferences. Additionally, Emily started pursuing financial independence through seeking part-time jobs aiming to reduce her reliance on her mother.

"... Now I'm starting to find ways to have a bigger role in my own choices."(Emily)
"... What I feel now is different from before. Nowadays, I always say I prefer option B. Then I ask my mom for her opinion. If she starts to steer me towards option A, I won't take it entirely..."(Emily)
"... Even though my mom always says, 'If you want to buy anything, ask mom,' or 'If it's something expensive, she will manage to get it.' But as time goes on, I realize it's not good to just keep asking. So, I decided to try some part-time jobs."(Emily)

4. Self Assurance

4.1. Facing the Challenges of Father Absence

Presented with unique challenges in growing up without a father figure, Mario and Emily, as individuals demonstrated strong desire and effort to confront and overcome these obstacles.

Facing Internal Struggles

Growing up with identity dilemmas, Mario garnered negative opinions from others and developed a fear of socializing with his peers. To combat his fear, Mario braved himself to join a student organization at school, which sparked his curiosity at that time. This curiosity later proved beneficial as he found a supportive group of friends, helping him overcome his fear of socializing. In dealing with his identity dilemmas and external negative opinions, Mario worked on embracing himself, understanding and accepting his unique traits, such as his dominant feminine side and aversion to physical conflict, owning to them as part of his identity. Emily, on the other hand made attempts to cope with her circumstances through acceptance, accepting her incomplete family members, though not without her own reluctance.

"To overcome that... it was resolved during high school, actually. So, in high school, I was determined to join an organization at first. From the organization, my curiosity grew because I'm naturally a very curious person..."(Mario)
"Then, hanging out with friends, I joined in because I also wanted to try it out. It turned out not to be as I had imagined. I was afraid of being treated a certain way, but it didn't happen. There were many people who weren't like that, and fortunately, during high school, I didn't encounter peer pressure to engage in things like smoking or other mischief."(Mario)
"... reflecting on myself again, that it's okay to be different from others, as long as I don't disturb them. I don't give them a negative perception of who I am now."(Mario)
"...I have learned to be myself."(Mario)
"We have to accept it as what it is; there's nothing we can do about it."(Emily)
"It would be hypocritical to say that I have fully accepted it, hehe. So, for me personally, it's still heavy." (Emily)

Genuinity

Self-acceptance and the ability to be oneself and accept one's difference despite the challenges of growing up without a father figure from an early age is a journey both Mario and Emily have undergone. Mario embarked on a journey to understand himself more deeply and accept his unique traits without being swayed by external opinions that deemed him different from other men. This process helped him build self-confidence and embrace his true self. Emily, although she faced rejection from her father's side of the family after his passing, learned through her mother's teachings and guidance to treat others kindly despite rejection and ridicule. She also realized the importance of not being influenced by other people's opinions and staying true to herself.

"... reflecting on myself again, that it's okay to be different from others, as long as I don't disturb them. ..." (Mario)
"...I have learned to be myself."(Mario)
"... . Whether others er... like or dislike us, we just do what aligns with our own vision. We pursue what we envision..."(Mario)
"Well... I mainly learned from my mom. She would face things with a smile and say, 'If you end up struggling, you can ask for money here.' 'If we're able to give, we'll give, if not, then we won't.' She meant to show that what people say doesn't matter, so they don't know the truth and to keep things calm."(Emily)
"... I should've been able to be indifferent to what people say and focus more on being myself. Not because of the experiences they imposed on me that made me think, 'Oh, I have to be like this' so people won't judge me..."(Emily)
"... I shouldn't think about that, and I should just act the way I want to. Not worrying about what people say..." (Emily)

DISCUSSION

Growing up without a paternal figure from childhood can lead individuals to a quest of seeking a substitute for that role and create a sense of attachment. The presence of a father greatly influences a child's growth and development (Olsavsky et al., 2020), serving as a role model for life direction and behavior (Randles, 2020), and a source of affection and protection. It seems in Indonesia, the notion of fatherhood still leans toward the more traditional pattern of parenting, where fathers mainly provide material and financial support (Hidayah, Ramli, & Tassia, 2023). Studies in the past found connection between self-esteem with attachment style and anxiety in fatherless adolescents (Luo et al., 2012; Frazier & Cowan, 2020).

Children also learn from other male figures like older brothers, uncles, grandfathers, male pastor, and even friends' fathers (Phasha, Calvin, & Mokone, 2022). Ramatsetse and Ross's (2023) study also highlighted how their participants felt grateful for the material and emotional support from their social father figures. In this study, both Mario and Emily actively sought substitutes for their fathers. Mario found a supportive school friend, while Emily relied on her biological brother. It is possible for one's perceived social father figure to be more capable of providing both social and psychological support, and being emotionally present than one's biological father (McDougal, Durnell, & Dlamini, 2018), thus helping prevent the risk of future interpersonal difficulties with either family members, or peers since a fulfilled social need avoids one from developing a feeling of isolation and abandonment (Zhou et al., 2024). This supports the conception that a quality relationship with a social father figure holds similar, or more positive impacts for children, like that of a biological father (Yoon et al., 2018; Kesebonye & Amone-P'Olak, 2021). However, the father's role is often undervalued in adolescent development (Wong et al., 2019).

This study's thematic analysis revealed that both Mario and Emily faced psychological struggles due to the loss of a father figure from childhood. However, notable differences emerged, as they grew up in different families and social environments, which might differentiate the impacts of father absence towards self-esteem. Mario's testimony highlighted his struggles in developing in his identity without a male role model in the family. His feelings of inferiority stemming from himself often displaying a feminine side, which attracted negative opinions and hindered his social interactions. The absence of a father figure does have a chance for boys to develop a more feminine gender identity (De Lange, 2011). This can result in low self-confidence and difficulties adapting to one's surrounding environment (Wulandari & Shafarani, 2023; Hadi, Hastuti, & Marthalena, 2024). This type of apprehension is what's known as atttachment anxiety, the fear of being rejected and excluded socially, which may lead one to withdraw from social environments for extended period of times due to such internalized fears (Rubin et al., 2009). An individual who is incapable of effectively facing this problem could suffer long-term consequences in their future social life, including suffering a decline in self-esteem (Frazier & Cowan, 2020), and loneliness (Zhou et al., 2024). However, Emily did not face the same identity struggles as Mario back in her childhood. This difference may be attributed to her family environment, where her older brother was present throughout her childhood and willing to act as a substitute father figure, preventing the crisis of male figures in the household like Mario experienced.

Finding someone who is willing and capable of replacing one's father figure is crucial for adolescent development. However, this study identified another equally important factor, that is the support from external figures beyond the paternal figure being discussed from the start, such as the biological mother, sibling, or peers, which can facilitate an individual's self-acceptance. According to the two participants' testimony, they both received external support. Mario found support through a school friend, who assumed the role of a father figure, providing guidance on being a man. Emily, on the other hand, has her mother and her older brother for support. This evolving self-acceptance is what encourages individuals to embrace their true selves without being swayed by external opinions. Previous studies highlighted the benefits of a social father figure being like those of a biological father (Yoon et al., 2018; Kesebonye & Amone-P'olak, 2021). Involving the entire family system and peers also holds some importance in developing self-esteem and well-being, as well as preventing adverse childhood experiences due to paternal absence (Keizer, Helmerhorst, & Gelderen, 2019; Dwianti, Riza, & Aisha, 2024; Ibigbami et al., 2024; Wala & Aliero, 2024). Positive attachment relationships from adolescence to adulthood can foster good emotional and social development (Hopner et al., 2020). However, an important note in this study showed that Emily still felt that she didn't have a choice throughout her acceptance process, other than accepting her conditions.

Another intriguing part of this study's findings is how losing the father, the backbone of a family, also affects the mother. Significant changes in personality traits, and an increased amount of control towards Mario and Emily from the mother were recorded. These changes included traits previously applied by the father, which were then adapted by the mother, or emerged entirely from within her. Losing a husband does present its challenges and struggles for both children and wives, significantly impacting the wife's physical and psychological well-being due to loss of psychological and economic support, as well as shifts in status and roles within the family (Hafni & Sairah, 2021). Mario's mother hoped her children would one day bring

their family back to the days when they were economically comfortable. Emily's mother became increasingly dominant and controlling Emily's choices. Although both participants showed understanding that their mother had to take dual responsibilities as a parent, they still expressed displeasure at the increased control and desired independence over their lives and futures.

An important note is that this study has its own limitations. Generalizing this study's findings to all adolescents in Indonesia is considered difficult due to there being only two participants. Especially with the country being known for its cultural diversity, how they perceive the role of a father figure and its effects on one's self-esteem may differ. The limited number of participants and the gender differences restrict any further and deeper analysis on specific aspects. In future research, focusing on the impact of losing a father figure on a single gender could yield more detailed results, and greater number of participants would grant robust grounds for generalization. Assessing additional moderating variables such as socioeconomic and cultural factors could also be taken into consideration. Further explorations into the dynamics the wives experience after losing their husbands within the family is also recommended for future studies.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Losing a father figure in a family can have diverse impacts on adolescence. Some may face identity dilemmas, missing paternal attachment which may lead to attachment issues, and rejection from their environment. Being able to fully accept these differences is crucial for developing self-esteem, which fosters self-confidence and the ability to be true to oneself. External environments, including family members, social father figures, and peers play a positive role on building and enforcing self-esteem in adolescents who have lost their fathers. The mother in the family also experiences shifts and dynamics as the effect of losing the father, often taking dual parental roles, which can lead to increased restrictions and control over the children. Acknowledging the effects of father absence in adolescents in developing and conducting psychological interventions in the future would prove beneficial to the ones facing such challenge from childhood. This study also aims to raise awareness of the impacts of father absence on adolescents.

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DECLARATION

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Consent for publication

All individual participants have consented to the submission of the study to the journal.

Availability of Data and Material (ADM)

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Authors' contributions

First Author (C. Amadeo R.): Carlo. A. R. played a major role in designing the research, collecting data through interviews with research participants, analyzing data, and writing the manuscript. Second Author (R. Arianti): R. Arianti contributed in supervising and providing advices throughout the whole study process.

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