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The authors are: Aditya Ailfa Yundar⁽¹⁾, Nurul Indan Wilyand⁽²⁾, Fitriani Zuhrotin⁽³⁾, Nénaxael Ninawati⁽⁴⁾.

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Abstract

Background. Paternal death during early adulthood disrupts a central relational anchor of self-esteem at a developmental stage that already demands identity consolidation and role independence. Indonesian government data document a substantial population of orphaned children and single-parent households, yet how young adults who lose fathers to death specifically reconstruct self-esteem within Indonesia's Islamic, collectivist cultural setting remains sparsely documented in the phenomenological literature.

Purpose. This study offers a grounded, in-depth account of the self-esteem reconstruction process among three Indonesian young adults (ages 19 to 29) bereaved of their fathers, focusing on the mechanisms rather than only the outcomes of this process.

Method. A descriptive phenomenological design was used. Three purposively selected participants domiciled in Banjarmasin, Jakarta, and Cimahi took part in semi-structured, in-depth online interviews; four researchers coded independently before reaching consensus. Trustworthiness was supported by member checking, triangulation with field notes, and an audit trail.

Results. Seven themes emerged: emotional dynamics and empathy, spiritual self-acceptance, responsibility and independence, new prosocial life purpose, father as an internalised role model, paternal recognition as a self-worth anchor, and emotional regulation difficulties.

Conclusion. Within the scope of this three-participant study, the findings suggest that spiritual meaning-making may function as a culturally specific restoration mechanism within the Dual Process Model, that ante-mortem paternal recognition can operate as an intrapsychic self-esteem buffer, and that gender role expectations shape how role transitions after paternal bereavement affect self-esteem. These patterns are offered as analytically transferable propositions for a specific cultural context rather than as generalisable claims.

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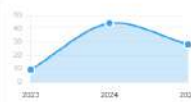
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Isma'li Isma'li⁽¹⁾, Atok Miftachul Hudha⁽²⁾, Darso Iswatiningga⁽³⁾, Ly Annisa⁽⁴⁾

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Spiritual Acceptance, Role Transition, and Internalised Paternal Values: Phenomenological Narratives of Self-Esteem Reconstruction Among Fatherless Young Adults and Implications for Bereavement Education in Indonesia

Adiyo Alfa Yuliar⁽¹⁾, Nurul Irtan Willyand⁽²⁾, Fitriani Zuhrodi⁽³⁾, Ninawati Ninawati⁽⁴⁾

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Spiritual Acceptance, Role Transition, and Internalised Paternal Values: Phenomenological Narratives of Self-Esteem Reconstruction Among Fatherless Young Adults and Implications for Bereavement Education in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Background. Paternal death during early adulthood disrupts a central relational anchor of self-esteem at a developmental stage that already demands identity consolidation and role independence. Indonesian government data document a substantial population of orphaned children and single-parent households, yet how young adults who lose fathers to death specifically reconstruct self-esteem within Indonesia's Islamic, collectivist cultural setting remains sparsely documented in the phenomenological literature.

Purpose. This study offers a grounded, in-depth account of the self-esteem reconstruction process among three Indonesian young adults (ages 19 to 29) bereaved of their fathers, focusing on the mechanisms rather than only the outcomes of this process.

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KEYWORDS

Fatherless Young Adults, Indonesian Phenomenology, Paternal Bereavement, Self-Esteem Reconstruction, Spiritual Coping

INTRODUCTION

Fathers function as primary attachment figures whose emotional involvement and moral guidance underpin children's self-concept social competence,

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and long-term wellbeing (Lamb, 2010; Rosenberg, 1965). When paternal absence occurs through death rather than divorce or migration, it forecloses any possibility of relational repair, producing developmental consequences that are qualitatively distinct from other forms of paternal absence (Fajriyanti et al., 2024; Ninditha & Pringgadani, 2023; Hoppe et al., 2025).

In Indonesia, the Ministry of Religious Affairs recorded 246,214 orphans in West Java and 100,121 in DKI Jakarta alone (Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, 2025), and national Susenas household survey data indicate that 7.48% of young children in Indonesia live with a single parent and 1.69% live with neither biological parent (Badan Pusat Statistik Kota Semarang, 2024). Widely circulated media estimates suggesting that roughly one-fifth of Indonesian children grow up without an engaged paternal figure (Antara News, 2023; Narasi TV, 2023) point to a phenomenon of considerable scale, though these figures are treated here as indicative supplementary evidence rather than as precise national prevalence estimates, given their non-governmental sourcing. Patriarchal cultural norms that render many physically present fathers psychologically distant compound this picture (Ninditha & Pringgadani, 2023).

Early adulthood, spanning ages 19 to 29 (Arnett, 2000), is a period of identity exploration and role independence; for those bereaved of a father, these tasks unfold against grief, restructured family roles, and the loss of a primary aspirational model. Berg et al. (2016) found that parental death in childhood elevates depression risk in young adulthood, and a recent scoping review confirms that bereavement outcomes vary widely depending on individual and contextual processes that remain incompletely specified (Hoppe et al., 2025). Quantitative designs, however, aggregate trajectories and cannot access the lived mechanisms through which specific individuals reconstruct self-worth after loss.

This study is anchored primarily in the Dual Process Model (DPM) of bereavement coping (Stroebe & Schut, 1999, 2010), which frames grief as an oscillation between loss-oriented and restoration-oriented processing. Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory and Branden's (1995) six-pillar self-esteem model serve as complementary interpretive lenses: attachment quality shapes how the oscillation unfolds (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008), while Branden's pillars specify which dimensions of self-esteem are disrupted or activated by loss. Within Indonesia's Islamic and collectivist context, where norms often favour a measured pace of mourning (Hidayah et al., 2024; Çınaroğlu, 2024), this oscillation is also culturally regulated in ways that Western-centric bereavement models do not fully theorise.

A focused review of the Indonesian and international literature located several phenomenological and systematic studies of fatherlessness among adolescents and young women (Fajriyanti et al., 2024; Ninditha & Pringgadani, 2023; Nurmalasari et al., 2024; Febriani & Iswinarti, 2025; Rossall & Arianti, 2025), and quantitative studies linking father involvement or attachment to self-esteem in Indonesian young people (Sarfika et al., 2023). None of these, however, isolates death as the specific cause of paternal absence within a phenomenological design examining self-esteem reconstruction mechanisms among Indonesian young adults; this appears to be an under-examined intersection within a search of the available literature rather than a claim that no such study could exist elsewhere. This study addresses that intersection using Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method, aiming to: (1) document the lived experience of paternal death among fatherless young adults in Indonesia; (2) identify which of Branden's (1995) six self-esteem pillars are most disrupted, activated, or reconstructed; and (3) examine how attachment-related tendencies and DPM coping phases jointly shape the trajectory of self-esteem reconstruction. Given the three-participant sample, the findings below are intended as analytically rich, context-specific propositions rather than as population-level generalisations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies of fatherlessness frequently collapse divorce, migration, and death into a single category, obscuring the qualitatively distinct grief burden that accompanies irreversible loss, including the need to construct a posthumous relationship with the father and the social marking of orphanhood (Fajriyanti et al., 2024; Ninditha & Pringgadani, 2023). Lamb (2010) documented the breadth of paternal influence on cognitive and behavioural development; Nurmalasari et al. (2024) and Febriani and Iswinarti (2025) extended this to academic engagement and interpersonal relationship formation among fatherless Indonesian young adults, though neither isolated death as the cause of absence. Rossall and Arianti (2025) linked early paternal loss specifically to adolescent self-esteem deficits, and Sarfika et al. (2023), using an Indonesian adolescent sample, found that parental attachment quality predicts self-esteem and emotional-behavioural adjustment, providing a quantitative counterpart to the mechanisms examined qualitatively here.

As the primary interpretive framework, the DPM (Stroebe & Schut, 1999, 2010) conceptualises grief as oscillation between loss-oriented processing (confronting sadness and longing) and restoration-oriented processing (assuming new roles, rebuilding routines); healthy adaptation requires flexible movement between the two. Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory and Ainsworth et al.'s (1978) classification of secure, anxious-avoidant, avoidant-resistant, and disorganised patterns serve as a supporting lens explaining individual variation in how this oscillation unfolds: securely attached individuals tend to oscillate more adaptively, while insecure attachment is associated with hyperactivated or deactivated grief responses (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008). Eisma et al.'s (2023) meta-analysis of 31 studies corroborates that attachment anxiety is consistently associated with prolonged grief symptoms, reinforcing attachment's role as a moderating rather than primary mechanism within this study's framework. Shen et al. (2021) further showed that self-esteem mediates the relationship between attachment anxiety and psychological distress, positioning self-esteem as an active buffer rather than a passive outcome of grief.

Branden's (1995) six-pillar self-esteem model and Neimeyer's (2016) meaning reconstruction model are treated as secondary interpretive tools applied to the outcomes of DPM oscillation: Branden's pillars, most relevantly living purposefully, self-acceptance, and self-responsibility, specify which dimensions of self-regard are disrupted or strengthened, while Neimeyer's model explains how bereaved individuals narratively re-integrate loss into a coherent life story. Eagly and Wood's (1982) social role theory supplies a further, more specific lens for interpreting gendered role transitions after bereavement: sons are typically expected to assume provider roles and daughters caregiving roles, transitions that, when successfully navigated, can activate self-responsibility and self-assertiveness (Branden, 1995). Antony and Kapoor's (2024) qualitative study of emerging adults after parental loss similarly found that grief unfolds within, and is shaped by, social and relational context rather than as a purely intrapsychic process, a finding this study extends to the specifically paternal, Indonesian, Islamic context.

Taken together, these frameworks converge on a specific proposition for the present study: paternal death in early adulthood disrupts the attachment foundation of self-worth, and its resolution is jointly shaped by DPM oscillation, gendered role demands, and, in this cultural setting, spiritual meaning-making (Hidayah et al., 2024; Çınaroğlu, 2024) that Western-centric models do not foreground. Studies of fatherlessness frequently collapse divorce, migration, and death into a single category, obscuring the qualitatively distinct grief burden that accompanies irreversible loss, including the need to construct a posthumous relationship with the father and the social marking of orphanhood (Fajriyanti et al., 2024; Ninditha & Pringgadani, 2023). Lamb (2010) documented the

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RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Design

This study used a descriptive phenomenological design (Colaizzi, 1978), selected because the objective, understanding the structure of lived experience of self-esteem reconstruction after paternal bereavement, is inherently first-person and experiential. Because the interview guide and analytic frame drew on Branden's (1995), Ainsworth et al.'s (1978), and Stroebe and Schut's (2010) constructs, the design is more precisely described as theory-informed phenomenological

analysis: bracketing was applied to researchers' personal assumptions and expectations about specific participant responses, not to the sensitising theoretical vocabulary itself, an approach documented in applied qualitative bereavement research.

Participants

Three participants were purposively selected using the following criteria: aged 19 to 29 (Arnett, 2000); biological father deceased; death, not divorce, migration, or non-involvement, as the cause of absence; and willingness to give informed consent (Table 1). All three lost fathers to illness and described close pre-loss relationships; this homogeneity is a sampling outcome that deepens within-case interpretive richness but limits transferability to cases of sudden death, conflictual father-child relationships, or non-Muslim and non-urban Indonesian contexts, a boundary made explicit in the Conclusion.

Table 1. Expanded Participant Contextual Characteristics

Characteristic	P1 (V)	P2 (D)	P3 (I)
Current Age	20	29	26
Gender	Female	Male	Male
Education Level	Undergraduate (active)	Undergraduate (completed)	Undergraduate (active)
City of Residence	Banjarmasin	Jakarta	Cimahi
Age at Father's Death	< 18 years	Early adulthood	Early adulthood
Years Since Paternal Loss	< 2 years	1-3 years	1-3 years
Cause of Father's Death	Natural death (illness)	Natural death (illness)	Natural death (illness)
Pre-Loss Paternal Relationship Quality	Close; emotionally involved	Close; father as moral anchor	Close; father as household leader
Family Structure Post-Loss	Mother + siblings	Mother + siblings	Mother + siblings
Interview Date	26 Oct 2025	23 Oct 2025	28 Oct 2025
Interview Duration	1 hr 10 min	1 hr 43 min	30 min

Note: Age at father's death and years since loss are approximate values derived from participant accounts during interviews.

Data Collection

Semi-structured, in-depth online interviews were conducted via Zoom in October 2025 with participants domiciled in Banjarmasin, Jakarta, and Cimahi. Interviews (30 minutes to 1 hour 43 minutes; $M \approx 71$ minutes) were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented with post-interview observational field notes. Transcripts were translated into English by a bilingual team member and verified by a second researcher.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step method (Table 2). All four researchers independently read transcripts and bracketed significant statements (Steps 1 to 2). Disagreement was defined as any statement that at least one coder assigned to a different thematic cluster than the others, or flagged as significant when other coders did not; this proportion, calculated per transcript and recorded in the audit trail, remained below 10% throughout and was resolved through documented consensus discussion. Two primary coders clustered themes independently before full-team review (Step 4); the lead researcher drafted an exhaustive description reviewed by the team

(Step 5); a fundamental structural statement was derived (Step 6) and member-checked by email with each participant (Step 7), with P2 requesting a minor revision to his grief-timeline description that was incorporated before finalisation.

Table 2. Stepwise Application of Colaizzi's (1978) Seven-Step Method with Inter-Researcher Process Details

No.	Analytical Step	Procedure Applied in This Study	Source
Step 1	Familiarisation	All four researchers independently read and re-read each verbatim transcript to obtain a holistic impression of participants' accounts.	Colaizzi (1978); Sanders (2003)
Step 2	Extracting Significant Statements	Researchers individually bracketed statements judged directly relevant to fatherlessness and self-esteem. Disagreement (assignment to a different cluster, or flagged by only one coder) remained below 10% per transcript and was resolved through consensus discussion.	Colaizzi (1978)
Step 3	Formulating Meanings	Phenomenological meanings were derived from each significant statement through reflective paraphrase, remaining close to participants' original language.	Colaizzi (1978)
Step 4	Clustering into Themes	Formulated meanings were inductively grouped into theme clusters by two researchers independently; agreement was reached through iterative discussion.	Colaizzi (1978); Sanders (2003)
Step 5	Developing Exhaustive Description	An integrated narrative synthesising all theme clusters was drafted by the lead researcher and reviewed by all team members.	Colaizzi (1978)
Step 6	Identifying Fundamental Structure	The essential structure of the lived experience was articulated as a concise phenomenological statement.	Colaizzi (1978)
Step 7	Member Checking	The structural description was emailed to each participant for confirmation. P2's feedback on his grief timeline was incorporated before finalisation.	Colaizzi (1978); Sugiyono (2019)

Source: adapted from Colaizzi (1978) and Sanders (2003).

Trustworthiness

Following Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility rested on member checking and triangulation with field notes; transferability on the descriptive detail in Table 1; dependability on the audit trail summarised in Table 2; and confirmability on reflexivity notes maintained by each researcher throughout data collection and analysis.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed the ethical guidelines of the Master's Programme in Psychology, Universitas Tarumanagara (Protocol FPSI-UNTAR/QR/2025/10), consistent with the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants gave digitally signed informed consent, retained the right to withdraw without consequence, and were anonymised as P1 to P3. Given the emotionally sensitive subject matter, interviewers were trained to monitor visible distress during interviews and were authorised to pause or terminate any session at the participant's request or on their own judgement; no

interview required pausing or termination. Each participant received, prior to interview, contact information for the university counselling service and a national mental health helpline, and was offered a post-interview debriefing call; all three participants were contacted again within 48 hours to check on their wellbeing. Audio recordings are scheduled for deletion upon publication.

Research Flowchart

Figure 1 presents the procedural flowchart of the research process, illustrating the sequential and iterative stages from problem identification through theme extraction and member-checked validation.

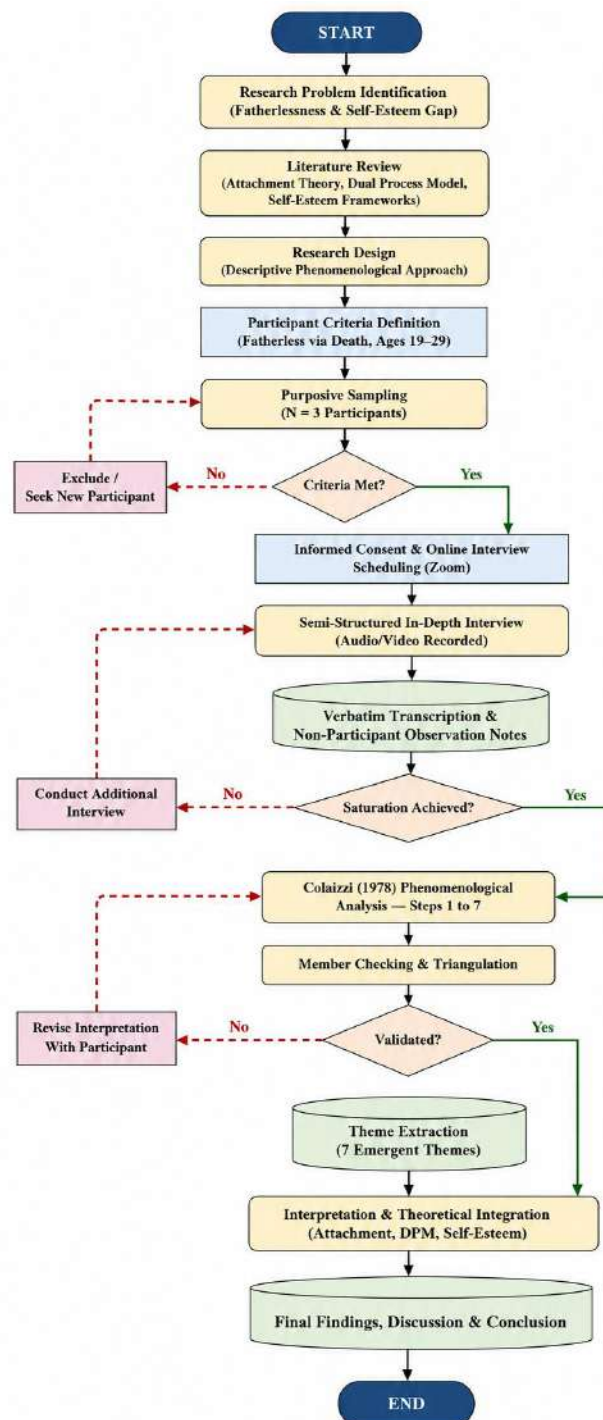


Figure 1. Research Process Flowchart for the Descriptive Phenomenological Study of Fatherlessness and Self-Esteem Reconstruction

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Colaizzi (1978) analysis of three verbatim transcripts yielded seven overarching themes representing the essential structural features of the lived experience of paternal bereavement and self-esteem reconstruction in early adulthood. Table 3 provides a thematic overview; the subsections below lead with participants’ own words before connecting these to theory, so that the phenomenological essence of each theme remains central to the interpretation that follows.

Table 3. Summary of Seven Emergent Themes from Colaizzi (1978) Analysis

T.	Theme Label		Description of Findings	Theoretical Grounding
1	Emotional Dynamics and Empathy After Paternal Loss		Profound grief, shock, anger, and disbelief characterised the immediate aftermath of paternal death across all three participants. Loss was accompanied by heightened interpersonal empathy, with participants becoming acutely sensitive to others’ pain, a pattern consistent with other-directed grief regulation.	Stroebe & Schut (2010); Berg et al. (2016); Bonanno (2004)
2	Spiritual Acceptance	Self-	Acceptance of paternal loss was mediated by Islamic religious frameworks. Participants drew on beliefs about divine will and life cycles to reach sincere, if incomplete, acceptance, a culturally embedded restoration-oriented coping process not fully captured by Western grief models.	Park (2010); Hidayah et al. (2024); Çınaroğlu (2024)
3	Responsibility and Independence		Loss accelerated assumption of adult roles, including financial self-sufficiency, emotional support for siblings, and household leadership. Guilt-driven redemptive behaviour was prominent in P2, while role succession was most explicit in P3.	Eagly & Wood (1982); Arnett (2000); Antony & Kapoor (2024)
4	New Life Purpose with Prosocial Orientation		Participants reoriented life goals toward family duty and prosocial contribution. Where prior purpose had been person-bound (the father), participants reconstructed purpose around obligation, contribution, and moral legacy, reflecting both DPM restoration-orientation and meaning reconstruction.	Neimeyer (2016); Park (2010); Park et al. (2024); Branden (1995)
5	Father Internalised Model and Principle	as Role Moral	The psychological presence of the father persisted through internalised moral values and behavioural principles. Rather than detachment from the deceased, participants maintained continuing bonds expressed through ethical conduct and social judgements.	Bowlby (1969); Lamb (2010); Mikulincer & Shaver (2008); Hoppe et al. (2025)

6	Paternal Recognition as a Protective Factor for Self-Worth	Small acts of ante-mortem paternal acknowledgement became enduring intrapsychic anchors of self-worth. Paternal recognition prior to death functioned as a protective factor against grief-induced self-esteem erosion, consistent with reflected appraisal theory.	Rosenberg (1965); Branden (1995); Rossall & Arianti (2025)
7	Emotional Regulation Difficulties	Emotional suppression, social withdrawal, and selective disclosure characterised participants' grief management. Collectivist norms and introverted personality compounded emotional inhibition, representing the primary unresolved psychological vulnerability in all three cases.	Mikulincer & Shaver (2008); Eisma et al. (2023); Bonanno (2004)

Source: authors' elaboration based on Colaizzi (1978), Branden (1995), Stroebe & Schut (2010), and Park (2010).

Emotional Dynamics and Empathy After Paternal Loss

P1 captured the raw loss of the father's functional and symbolic role in this way:
It feels like something is gone, losing the role of a father hurts. Especially losing the figure itself. I still want to have a father. (P1-69C).

P2 described a more complex cognitive-affective shift, from an assumptive world grounded in relational safety to an awareness of life's fundamental contingency:
Once you feel the loss of family, close family I mean, it really changes the perception that life is already quite cruel. (P2-40C)

All three participants described the immediate aftermath of paternal death as profoundly destabilising, an experience characterised by disbelief, somatic emptiness, and the sudden absence of a central relational anchor. P1's account is consistent with the loss-oriented phase of the DPM (Stroebe & Schut, 2010), characterised by active confrontation of grief. P2's shift aligns with Park's (2010) concept of global meaning violation, the disruption of core assumptive beliefs about the world's predictability; a related recent analysis found that religious affiliation itself moderates how bereaved individuals resolve exactly this kind of meaning violation (Park et al., 2024). What distinguishes P2's account from a straightforward grief response is its social dimension: his altered worldview became a resource for interpersonal empathy, motivating deliberate restraint from causing pain to others, an adaptive prosocial mechanism consistent with Bonanno's (2004) account of flexible self-regulation in resilient bereavement trajectories.

Spiritual Self-Acceptance

P3 articulated a theology of mortality that reframes prolonged mourning as spiritually harmful:
Because every living being will surely not exist. We shouldn't be immersed in sadness. Because if we keep being immersed, the one who left us will also be sad. (P3-22C, 45C)

P2's account distinguished sincere resignation from complete emotional processing:
I actually haven't accepted it yet, accepting like earlier, how is that, I myself haven't. But I sincerely accept that he is gone. (P2-74C to 78C)

Spiritual and religious meaning frameworks emerged as the primary mediating pathway between grief and self-acceptance across all three participants. The belief that excessive mourning distresses the deceased constitutes a powerful cultural motivator for shifting from loss-oriented to restoration-oriented processing, a mechanism the DPM identifies as desirable but does not theorise as culturally regulated. This pattern converges with recent qualitative evidence from other Indonesian Islamic communities, where widowed women similarly drew on religious surrender to reach sincere, if gradual, acceptance of loss (Hidayah et al., 2024), and with cross-cultural work describing Islamic bereavement as an active, faith-anchored meaning-making process rather than passive resignation (Çınaroğlu, 2024). P2's nuance, volitional sincerity without full emotional resolution, aligns with Branden's (1995) self-acceptance pillar and extends Park's (2010) global meaning framework by showing that spiritual frameworks can facilitate volitional acceptance as a distinct precursor to emotional processing.

Responsibility and Independence

P1 responded to loss through economic self-sufficiency:

I sell things for my pocket money so that I don't burden them too much. I think, after I graduate I should find a job, it's pitiful. (P1-110C)

P3's account was the most structurally explicit in terms of role succession:

My role now is like what my father did to my mother. That means giving more attention to my mother. (P3-57C)

Paternal death catalysed accelerated assumption of adult roles across all participants. P1's response reflects restoration-oriented DPM coping (Stroebe & Schut, 2010), the reorganisation of role identity to meet functional demands created by loss. Interpreted through Eagly and Wood's (1982) social role theory, P3's direct paternal role succession reflects gender-concordant cultural expectations for male family members following bereavement, a pattern also documented among emerging adults navigating parental loss within family systems more broadly (Antony & Kapoor, 2024). Successful role assumption activated Branden's (1995) self-responsibility pillar, strengthening one dimension of self-esteem precisely through an experience of loss.

New Life Purpose with Prosocial Orientation

P1's initial experience was one of motivational collapse:

The purpose is already gone, the thing that used to be the purpose is already gone. Sometimes I definitely think that way. (P1-139)

P2 demonstrated a more advanced stage, in which paternal moral injunctions became the foundation of a new prosocial life mission:

My father always said, don't ever forget to help family. Now the spirit to help family is even stronger. Since my father passed away, I seriously learned to save, like redeeming sins. (P2-72C)

P1's account closely aligns with Park's (2010) global meaning violation. P2's transformation, from person-bound purpose to value-anchored, prosocial purpose, is consistent with Neimeyer's (2016) identity reconstruction model and Branden's (1995) living purposefully pillar, and mirrors a broader recent finding that religious and spiritual meaning frameworks actively shape how bereaved individuals resolve exactly this kind of disrupted purpose (Park et al., 2024). A plausible contribution of this study is that prosocial purpose reconstruction in this Indonesian Muslim context draws not only from personal values but from explicit paternal moral instructions that acquire increased normative force following the father's death, functioning as an internalised moral mandate.

Father as Internalised Role Model and Moral Principle

P2's account of his father's unconditional ethical conduct was particularly striking:

Doing good regardless of problems, regardless of situations. He never looked at situations, if doing good then just do good. Even to bad people he was good, and that is what I carry everywhere. (P2-172C)

The psychological presence of the father persisted beyond physical death through internalised moral principles and behavioural templates, constituting what Bowlby (1969) termed a continuing bond. This internalisation extends Bowlby's (1969) proposition that internal working models continue to operate post-bereavement as relational templates, and is broadly consistent with a recent scoping review identifying the ongoing psychological relationship with a deceased parent as one of the more consistent protective processes reported across the childhood and youth bereavement literature (Hoppe et al., 2025). From a self-esteem perspective (Branden, 1995), this process is most directly associated with the personal integrity pillar. Participants with stronger paternal internalisation showed more coherent, purposeful self-narratives, suggesting that the quality of the ante-mortem father-child relationship functions as a protective factor against self-esteem disintegration following loss.

Paternal Recognition as a Protective Factor for Self-Worth

P2's account was particularly vivid:

The pride that can never be replaced was when my father used my photo as his profile picture. So now, even after a long time since he passed away, the most pleasant time for me is when I go home, because that's my only chance to see his real smile. (P2-16C)

An analytically significant finding emerged from this theme: small acts of ante-mortem paternal acknowledgement, seemingly minor expressions of pride or affirmation, were retrospectively transformed into durable intrapsychic anchors of self-worth. Rosenberg's (1965) reflected appraisals theory explains how individuals internalise the evaluations of significant others to form self-regard; the present data suggest that these internalised appraisals, once consolidated, continue to sustain self-worth after the appraisal source is permanently lost, functioning as a posthumous reflected appraisal. This pattern is consistent with, and extends, recent findings that early paternal loss shapes adolescent and young-adult self-esteem trajectories in ways tied specifically to the quality of the pre-loss relationship rather than to loss alone (Rossall & Arianti, 2025), and with Indonesian survey evidence that parental attachment quality predicts self-esteem outcomes independent of current parental presence (Sarfika et al., 2023). This constitutes one of the more theoretically novel observations of the study, with direct practical implications for pre-bereavement psychoeducation targeting parents of young adults.

Figure 2 below presents the integrated conceptual framework linking attachment, DPM coping, and self-esteem reconstruction; Tables 4 and 5 summarise, in qualitative rather than numerical form, the relative emphasis and salience of themes across participants.

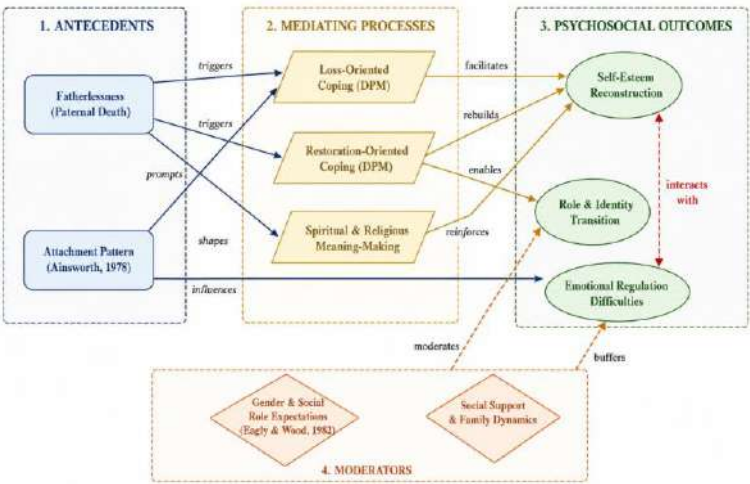


Figure 2. Integrated Conceptual Framework: Attachment, Dual Process Model, and Self-Esteem Reconstruction Following Paternal Death

Table 4. Qualitative Thematic Emphasis Matrix Across Branden’s (1995) Six Pillars of Self-Esteem

Branden’s (1995) Pillar	P1 (V, Female, 20)	P2 (D, Male, 29)	P3 (I, Male, 26)
Living Consciously	Moderate	High	High
Self-Acceptance	Emerging	Moderate	Moderate
Self-Responsibility	Moderate	Prominent	High
Self-Assertiveness	Emerging	Prominent	High
Living Purposefully	Moderate	Prominent	High
Personal Integrity	Moderate	High	High

Note. Bands (Emerging < Moderate < High < Prominent) reflect the coding team’s interpretive judgement of relative thematic emphasis derived from Colaizzi (1978) coding depth and frequency per participant. They are qualitative interpretive judgements, not standardised psychometric scores, and are not intended to support statistical comparison between participants.

Table 5. Qualitative Salience of Coded Statements by Theme and Participant

Theme	P1 (V, Female, 20)	P2 (D, Male, 29)	P3 (I, Male, 26)
Emotional Dynamics & Empathy	Salient	Highly Salient	Moderate
Spiritual Self-Acceptance	Moderate	Salient	Moderate
Responsibility & Independence	Moderate	Salient	Moderate
New Life Purpose	Moderate	Salient	Emerging
Father as Role Model	Emerging	Moderate	Emerging
Paternal Recognition & Self-Worth	Emerging	Moderate	Emerging

Emotional Regulation Difficulties	Emerging	Salient	Moderate
<i>Note. Bands summarise the relative density of coded significant statements per theme per participant (Colaizzi, 1978, Steps 2-4). Because interview duration varied substantially (30 minutes to 1 hour 43 minutes), raw counts are not reported numerically here so as not to imply precise quantitative comparability across participants; bands should be read as an interpretive density map rather than a statistical distribution.</i>			

Emotional Regulation Difficulties

P2 captured the dilemma of the bereaved caregiver:
I have to rely on my own energy. It's not that I don't believe, but when I show sadness to family it just brings everyone down. (P2-242C)

P3 demonstrated similar avoidance through social withdrawal:
Because everyone has their own problems, and if I tell my heavy problems to others, it might burden them, so it's better for me to keep it inside. (P3-27C)

Emotional regulation difficulties emerged as the most consistently unresolved psychological theme across all three participants, manifesting through suppression, withdrawal, and selective disclosure, patterns shaped by the intersection of insecure attachment, introversion, and collectivist cultural norms. This suppression pattern, other-protective emotional concealment, reflects the avoidant deactivation strategy identified by Mikulincer and Shaver (2008) in insecurely attached bereaved individuals. It is also consistent with Eisma et al.'s (2023) meta-analytic finding that attachment-related avoidance and anxiety are both robustly associated with prolonged and unresolved grief symptoms across adult samples, suggesting that P2 and P3's suppression is not merely a cultural display rule but plausibly compounds grief-processing difficulty over time. The current data extend this literature by suggesting that Indonesian collectivist norms do not merely shape how grief is expressed but whether it is expressed at all, a distinction with clinical significance for the design of culturally appropriate bereavement interventions.

Cross-Participant Structural Analysis: Attachment, DPM, and Self-Esteem

Table 6 offers a systematic cross-participant comparison of attachment-related interpretive tendencies, DPM coping responses, self-esteem implications, and primary unresolved vulnerabilities. Because no standardised attachment instrument was administered, the attachment labels in Table 6 are interpretive tendencies drawn from the researchers' thematic coding of participants' relational narratives, not clinical or psychometric classifications, and should be read accordingly.

Table 6. Cross-Participant Structural Analysis: Attachment-Related Tendencies, DPM Coping, Self-Esteem Implications, and Unresolved Vulnerabilities

Dimension	P1 (V, Female, 20)	P2 (D, Male, 29)	P3 (I, Male, 26)
Attachment-Related Interpretive Tendency (informed by Ainsworth et al., 1978)	Anxious-avoidant-leaning: initial anger and rejection; difficulty self-soothing; persistent	Disorganised-to-emerging-secure-leaning: oscillation between yearning, guilt, and purposeful	Avoidant-resistant-leaning: social withdrawal; fear of burdening others; ambivalent proximity-

	longing for paternal acceptance figure	seeking
Loss-Oriented Response (DPM)	Persistent sadness; low self-acceptance; prolonged grief without clear resolution	Trauma confrontation; intrusive grief; guilt-driven reparative behaviour toward family
Restoration-Oriented Response (DPM)	Financial self-sufficiency; adopting caregiving functions for mother	Shock; withdrawal; emotionally suppressed mourning with minimal social disclosure
Self-Esteem Impact (Branden, 1995)	Family leadership; prosocial orientation; meaning-making through generosity and moral continuity	Assumption of paternal household roles; independent decision-making replacing prior paternal consultation
	Reduced self-acceptance and purpose-orientation; emerging self-responsibility through economic independence	Strong personal integrity and purposeful living; moderate self-acceptance; elevated self-responsibility
Primary Unresolved Vulnerability	Moderate across all pillars; growing self-assertiveness and self-responsibility through role transition	Incomplete self-acceptance; motivational deficit linked to loss of father as primary purpose anchor
	Emotional suppression to protect others; risk of burnout through sustained other-directed coping	Social isolation and fear of emotional disclosure; limited access to peer support

Source: authors’ elaboration based on Ainsworth et al. (1978), Stroebe & Schut (2010), and Branden (1995). Because no standardised attachment instrument was administered, attachment labels are interpretive tendencies drawn from thematic coding of participants’ relational narratives, not clinical or psychometric classifications.

The cross-participant comparison reveals a pattern worth noting with appropriate caution given the sample size: attachment-related insecurity was present across all three cases, yet its manifestation and DPM consequences differed by the interpretive attachment tendency assigned. P1’s anxious-avoidant-leaning pattern was associated with persistent loss-orientation and limited restoration movement; P2’s pattern, coded as moving from disorganised toward an emerging secure style, showed the greatest oscillatory range; and P3’s avoidant-resistant-leaning pattern was associated with stable but emotionally inhibited restoration-orientation. This differentiation is broadly consistent with Mikulincer and Shaver’s (2008) proposition that attachment style shapes the process of grief rather than determining its outcome, though with only three cases this should be read as an illustrative pattern rather than a tested association.

Gender Role Dynamics in Post-Loss Self-Esteem

Table 7 documents the gender-differentiated role transitions observed following paternal bereavement, analysed through Eagly and Wood's (1982) social role theory.

Table 7. Gender Role Manifestations Following Paternal Death: A Social Role Theory Analysis

Role Dimension	Post-Loss Manifestation in Study	Participant	Source
Provider / Household Leader	Assumed financial decision-making and household management responsibilities vacated by deceased father	P3	Eagly & Wood (1982)
Emotional Strength Display	Concealed personal grief to sustain family morale; suppressed vulnerability in front of siblings and mother	P2	Eagly & Wood (1982)
Caregiver / Nurturer	Took over domestic responsibilities, provided emotional care to mother and younger siblings	P1	Eagly & Wood (1982)
Dual Role Burden (Daughter)	Combined academic continuation, economic self-sufficiency efforts, and family caregiving simultaneously	P1	Eagly & Wood (1982); Arnett (2000)
Prosocial Orientation	Channelled grief into helping others, saving money, and fulfilling father's explicit moral injunctions	P2	Neimeyer (2016); Branden (1995)
Independent Decision-Making	Made major family and personal decisions previously mediated by father, without paternal guidance	P3	Branden (1995)
Self-Esteem Response to Role	Successful role enactment strengthened the self-responsibility pillar; role failure risk created anxiety and motivational loss	P1, P2, P3	Eagly & Wood (1982); Branden (1995)

Source: authors' elaboration based on Eagly & Wood (1982), Arnett (2000), and Branden (1995).

As Table 7 shows, the role demands precipitated by paternal death were both gender-differentiated and self-esteem-consequential. Successful role enactment strengthened Branden's (1995) self-responsibility and self-assertiveness pillars, while role overload created anxiety and motivational loss, a pattern consistent with the broader observation that parental loss reshapes self-esteem through the relational and social context in which the bereaved young adult is embedded, not through intrapsychic grief alone (Antony & Kapoor, 2024).

Comparison with Prior Studies: Convergence, Divergence, and Extension

Table 8 situates the current findings against prior studies, prioritising recent, peer-reviewed, Scopus-indexed sources published between 2023 and 2026 alongside the foundational theoretical sources introduced earlier.

Table 8. Systematic Comparison with Prior Studies: Convergence, Divergence, and Theoretical Extension

Study	Focus	Key Finding	Convergence / Divergence / Extension by Current Study
Ramatsetse & Ross (2023)	Adult women; father absence	Father absence, including but not limited to death, is associated with adverse psychosocial outcomes, including self-esteem and identity difficulties, in adult women	Convergence: P1 showed comparable self-esteem reduction and identity uncertainty. Extension: this study isolates death-induced loss specifically and adds spiritual meaning-making as a culturally specific mediator absent from Ramatsetse and Ross's South African context.
Kristianto & Sutanto (2022)	Male early adults 19-29; paternal involvement	Paternal involvement positively predicts self-esteem in young Indonesian men	Convergence: P2 and P3 confirmed that paternal absence created self-esteem deficits requiring compensatory strategies. Extension: phenomenological depth reveals that active role succession, not simply absence, is the mechanism.
Hamdi Bacha & Soltani (2024)	Attachment patterns in adulthood	Secure attachment fosters trusting relationships; insecure attachment impedes them	Convergence: all three participants showed insecure attachment-related tendencies with distinct manifestations. Extension: this study maps these tendencies onto specific DPM phases, a linkage not examined by Hamdi Bacha and Soltani.
Berg et al. (2016)	Parental death; depression in young adults	Parental death in childhood significantly elevates depression risk in young adulthood	Convergence: emotional regulation difficulties and grief persistence aligned with depressive vulnerability indicators. Divergence: participants also showed partial resilience through meaning reconstruction and spiritual acceptance, outcomes not captured by Berg et al.'s quantitative cohort design.
Shen et al. (2021)	Self-esteem, adult attachment, psychological distress	Self-esteem mediates the relationship between attachment anxiety and psychological distress	Convergence: Theme 6 (paternal recognition as self-worth anchor) provides lived experiential evidence for this mediation model. Extension: this study shows ante-mortem paternal recognition functions as a retrospective self-esteem buffer, a

			mechanism not theorised by Shen et al.
Bonanno (2004)	Human resilience following bereavement	Many bereaved individuals follow resilient, not chronic grief, trajectories	Partial convergence: P2 and P3 exhibited resilient trajectories consistent with Bonanno's model. Divergence: P1's prolonged emotional disruption suggests resilience is non-linear and may be moderated by gender role demands and pre-loss attachment quality.
Sarfika et al. (2023)	Indonesian adolescents; parental attachment, self-esteem	Parental attachment quality predicts self-esteem and emotional-behavioural adjustment	Convergence: supports the attachment-self-esteem link observed across all three cases. Extension: this study specifies a qualitative mechanism, DPM-phase mediation, that may underlie that quantitative association.
Rossall & Arianti (2025)	Early paternal loss; adolescent self-esteem	Early paternal loss is associated with lower adolescent self-esteem	Convergence: P1's persistent self-esteem deficit mirrors this finding. Extension: the present data suggest a qualifying condition, namely that ante-mortem paternal recognition may buffer rather than uniformly predict this deficit.
Eisma et al. (2023)	Adult attachment; prolonged grief (meta-analysis)	Attachment anxiety and avoidance are both associated with prolonged grief symptoms	Convergence: Theme 7 suppression patterns in P2 and P3 are consistent with this attachment-grief link. Extension: identifies collectivist, other-protective concealment as a specific cultural mechanism contributing to this association.
Hoppe et al. (2025)	Childhood and youth bereavement (scoping review)	Bereavement outcomes depend heavily on family and cultural context	Convergence: outcome variability across the three cases confirms this pattern. Extension: provides a detailed account of an Indonesian Islamic family context largely absent from the mostly Western evidence base reviewed.
Antony & Kapoor (2024)	Emerging adults; parental loss within social context	Grief unfolds within, and is shaped by, social and relational context rather than as a purely intrapsychic process	Convergence: role transitions in Theme 3 and Table 7 are embedded in family and social context, not purely internal experience. Extension: adds an Indonesian, Islamic, death-specific bereavement lens.

Hidayah et al. (2024); Çınaroğlu (2024)	Islamic bereavement and religious coping	Islamic surrender gradual, acceptance of loss	religious supports sincere of loss	Convergence: Theme 2 mirrors this surrender-based coping process. Extension: connects spiritual coping explicitly to DPM oscillation and self-esteem outcomes, a linkage neither study examined.
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Source: authors' synthesis. Studies are ordered to present foundational and 2022 comparators first, followed by 2023-2025 sources.

Read together with Table 8, three points of extension are worth highlighting. First, where Sarfika et al. (2023) established quantitatively that parental attachment predicts self-esteem and emotional-behavioural adjustment among Indonesian adolescents, the present data illustrate a plausible mechanism for that association among slightly older, bereaved participants: attachment-related tendencies appear to shape which DPM coping phase dominates, which in turn shapes which of Branden’s (1995) pillars is affected. Second, where Rossall and Arianti (2025) linked early paternal loss to lower adolescent self-esteem, the current data suggest a qualifying condition, namely that the quality of the ante-mortem relationship, and specifically remembered acts of paternal recognition, may buffer rather than uniformly predict this deficit. Third, where Hoppe et al.’s (2025) scoping review found that bereavement outcomes for children and youth depend heavily on family and cultural context, this study offers a detailed, culturally specific account of what that context looks like within an Indonesian Islamic family, extending a mostly Western evidence base. These are offered as analytically grounded propositions arising from three cases, not as claims that displace the cited quantitative or review evidence.

CONCLUSION

This study used a descriptive phenomenological method to examine how three Indonesian young adults reconstruct self-esteem after paternal death. Seven themes, emotional dynamics and empathy, spiritual self-acceptance, responsibility and independence, prosocial life purpose reconstruction, father as an internalised moral role model, paternal recognition as a self-worth anchor, and emotional regulation difficulties, together describe the essential structure of this lived experience. Within the scope of three cases, the findings suggest that spiritual meaning-making functioned as a culturally embedded restoration-oriented coping mechanism, that ante-mortem paternal recognition operated as a durable posthumous reflected appraisal buffering self-worth, and that gender role enactment after bereavement shaped self-esteem through the self-responsibility and self-assertiveness pillars.

These propositions are bounded by clear limitations. The three-participant sample, appropriate for phenomenological inquiry, restricts the range of attachment and bereavement circumstances examined: all participants lost fathers to illness rather than suddenly, and all described close pre-loss relationships, so the findings may not transfer to sudden-death bereavement, conflictual father-child relationships, or non-Muslim and non-urban Indonesian contexts. The urban sample, online interview format, and retrospective design further limit observational richness and introduce memory-reconstruction effects. Future research should prioritise longitudinal designs tracking self-esteem reconstruction at multiple post-loss time points, quantitative validation of the proposed conceptual framework using standardised attachment and self-esteem instruments, and comparative phenomenological work across sudden versus anticipated loss and across religious contexts.

Practically, the findings point to three directions: university counselling services could pilot bereavement support that explicitly incorporates Islamic spiritual frameworks; grief counsellors working with collectivist-context clients could address emotional suppression through group formats that normalise shared expression; and psychoeducation for parents with life-limiting illness could highlight the protective value of expressed paternal affirmation well before bereavement occurs.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the authors used AI-assisted language editing tools for the purpose of grammar checking and language clarity improvement. After using this tool/service, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Auhtor 1: Conceptualisation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing.

Auhtor 2: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Data Collection, Formal Analysis, Writing – Review & Editing.

Auhtor 3: Data Collection, Formal Analysis, Writing – Review & Editing.

Auhtor 4: Supervision, Conceptualisation, Validation, Writing – Review & Editing, Project Administration.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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