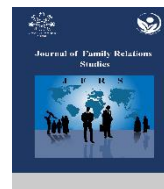




Contents lists available at <https://ecc.isc.ac/showJournal/39795>

Journal of Family Relations Studies

Journal home page: <http://jhfs.uma.ac.ir/>



## Research Paper

Phenomenology of the girls' psychological distress caused by the loss of the father: A qualitative study



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Kobra Namvaran<sup>1\*</sup> , Ezzatallah Ahmadi<sup>2</sup>  & Pari Yarifard<sup>3</sup> 

1. Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University, Tabriz, Iran.

2. Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University, Tabriz, Iran.

3. MA in General Psychology, The teacher of Education Organization of East Azarbaijan Province, Tabriz, Iran.



**Citation:** Namvaran, K., Ahmadi, E. & Yarifard, P. (2025). [Phenomenology of the girls' psychological distress caused by the loss of the father: A qualitative study (Persian)]. *Journal of Family Relations Studies*, 5 (1): 34-39. <https://doi.org/10.22098/jfrs.2024.14373.1170>

 [10.22098/jfrs.2024.14373.1170](https://doi.org/10.22098/jfrs.2024.14373.1170)

### ARTICLE INFO:

Received: 2024/01/05

Accepted: 2024/08/16

Available Online: 2025/02/20

### Key words:

Loss,  
Phenomenology,  
Psychological  
distress

### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aimed to provide a phenomenological analysis of psychological distress caused by the loss of the father in female adolescents in Tabriz, Iran.

**Methods:** This phenomenological study was conducted using a qualitative approach. Seven female adolescents who had lost their fathers in childhood due to illness were selected using purposive sampling. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews until data saturation. The interview texts were analyzed using Colaizzi's method.

**Results:** The findings of the study showed that psychological distress experienced by the girls by the absence of their fathers could be described with three main categories and eleven subcategories. The identified categories were emotional pressures (deprivation of companionship, deprivation of a supporter, mother's pressure, recalling memories and worries), social pressures (others' mistakes, hiding, inhibition, and limited relationships), and economic pressures (self-reliance and financial problems).

**Conclusion:** The dimensions of psychological distress experienced by male and female adolescents due to the absence of their fathers or mothers should be considered in psychological assessments and interventions.

## 1. Introduction

Psychological distress or stress is an integral part of everyday life experienced by all people to some extent and is the cause of many disorders (Slavich, 2016). Stress is a non-specific response of the body to any demand. In other words, stress is defined as the perception of a threat, along with anxiety, mental tension, and difficulty in adaptation, which physiologically refers to any stimulus that causes the release of cortisol (Fink, 2016).

Stress has a wide range of effects on a person's health and daily performance. Low stress is desirable, useful, and even productive, and it facilitates cognitive

function. However, intense and continuous stress leads to the vulnerability of the affected person (Joshi et al., 2012).

Loss, as the most stressful event that every human experiences in his/her life, is a permanent separation from something loved and desired by a person (Boelen & Prigerson, 2007). Meanwhile, the loss of parents in early childhood is a severe crisis in a child's life, so children are often very upset and experience a significant amount of distress in response to it (Brent et al., 2009). Therefore, the absence of parents is one of the most important stressful events in life that can

\*Corresponding Author:

Kobra Namvaran

Address: Department of Psychology, Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University, Tabriz, Iran.

E-mail: [k.namvaran@azaruniv.ac.ir](mailto:k.namvaran@azaruniv.ac.ir)

happen to a child or adolescent. Especially since adolescence is a period of transition and change, adolescents are more vulnerable to the negative effects of situational stressors such as the absence of parents. To some extent, adolescents under this stress may have problems creating a healthy balance and normal functioning in their daily activities (Etchegoyen & Trowell, 2005). Because stressors are often associated with family breakups and lead to parents' emotional turmoil, new life adjustment, and child's separation from parents, and play a big role in the occurrence of emotional crises in children and adolescents (East et al., 2007).

Parent-child interactions strengthen the child's social, cognitive, behavioral, and language development (Yoon et al., 2021). The participation of the father, along with the mother, promotes the child's social, psychological, and academic development (Jeynes, 2016). Children whose fathers are present in the family and actively participate in their life process and plans have higher levels of physical and mental health, social competencies, IQ, and learning performance compared to children whose fathers are not present in their educational and social development (Ward et al., 2015). The loss of a father prevents children from receiving paternal love and increases their pain (Richter et al., 2010). Thus, children become passive and unpredictable when interacting with others in the community and are exposed to harm (Lu & Liang, 2018). Single mothers have to work more than mothers in two-parent families, and this negatively affects maternal support and effective mother-child communication. Indeed, such women often experience poverty, economic problems, and lack of support (Damaske et al., 2017). Therefore, the loss of a spouse increases the mother's stress, and this, in turn, causes poor parenting behavior (Pelchat et al., 2003), less responsive and controlled practices (Ward & Lee, 2020), and more violence against single mothers (Choi & Becher, 2019). Hence, their mental health is often compromised, and they are likely to suffer from anxiety and depression. These problems adversely affect the growth of their children (Schleider et al., 2014). As a result, such children are likely to have poor discipline (Damaske et al., 2017), show destructive and problematic behaviors (Wang et al., 2020), and have premature sexual activity (Ellis et al., 2003). Moreover, academic performance, social-emotional skills, self-esteem, academic achievement, success in the labor market, financial security, and family formation of fatherless children are affected by the absence of a father in childhood (Mancini, 2010). On the other hand, the distress caused by it can weaken a person's coping abilities (Leopold & Kalmijn, 2016, quoted from Hamzeh Khorasani, 2024).

In addition, the absence of the father has more consequences in the lives of girls. Studies have shown that the loss of the father significantly affects girls' self-confidence and mental health (O'Dwyer, 2017), causing depression, rejection, and low intimacy (Demidenko et al., 2015), while boys may open a special account of their

emotional relationships and invest in their social relationships (Liu et al., 2015, quoted from Jahanbakshi et al., 2024). On the other hand, in a society with a collective culture, every important life decision, including choosing a major, following a job, or choosing a spouse, is accompanied by the consent of parents, especially fathers, and girls in a patriarchal society see their fathers as supporters and guides (Faize & Husain, 2021). Therefore, the pain of fatherlessness is more evident in these societies. Accordingly, an issue of interest is to find out the nature of the stress experienced by children, especially girls, after losing their fathers. Through this knowledge, fatherless children and teenagers can receive proper help managing these stresses. A review of the literature suggests that only a few studies (mostly using quantitative methods) have addressed the experience of psychological distress after the father's loss. However, studying such experiences through a qualitative approach can provide more reliable results. In addition, Shariatmadar and Taghdisi (2022) studied the changes in the lives of female adolescents after the death of their mothers. Therefore, the results indicated that the effects of the loss of the mother and the stresses and changes caused by it are permanent.

It can be concluded that the loss of the father has developmental effects on adolescents, especially on girls. Indeed, there has been no qualitative research conducted on the psychological distress caused by the loss of the father among female adolescents. This study aimed to examine the psychological distress caused by the loss of the father among female adolescents in Tabriz.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The study was conducted through a qualitative phenomenological approach. The participants in the study were female students aged 15-18 years living in Tabriz who had lost their father due to illness before the age of 12 and were willing to share their experiences. The participants were selected using purposive sampling. The data were collected through interviews with seven female students, and the interviews continued until data saturation was reached. Table 1 displays the characteristics of the participants.

**Table 1. The participants' characteristics**

Variable	Year	Frequency
Age	15	1
	16	2
	17	1
	18	3
Grade	9 <sup>th</sup>	1
	10 <sup>th</sup>	2
	11 <sup>th</sup>	1
	12 <sup>th</sup>	3
Age of the loss experience	2	1
	3	1
	4	2
	5	1
	11	2

As pointed out earlier, the data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The duration of each interview was 45-60 minutes. The interviews were conducted in participants' schools in the morning shifts after obtaining their informed consent. The interview questions focused on the psychological distress experienced by the participants after the loss of their fathers. Probing and follow-up questions were also asked to clarify any ambiguity in the participants' statements.

After contacting the school principals to identify the students with the entry criteria and inviting them, the research objectives were explained to the participants. Then, their informed consent was obtained from all the participants to attend the interviews and record the content of the interviews. They were also assured about the confidentiality and anonymity of their information. Moreover, they were told that after the completion of the study, their recorded data would be deleted from the phone. They were also told that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any stage of the study. The

data was analyzed using Colaizzi's method. The analysis was done simultaneously with the interviews. The trustworthiness of the data was checked as follows: For the credibility of the analyzed texts, each interview was returned to the participant to check its correctness, and the necessary revisions were applied based on the participant's feedback. The transferability of the data was enhanced by selecting the participants with maximum variation. To check the confirmability of the data, the researcher applied the active process of bracketing to prevent the entry of her presumptions. Finally, to check the dependability of the findings, the text of the interviews was reviewed by the members of the research team.

**3. Results**

The participants mentioned a wide range of psychological distress during their lives after the loss of their father. An analysis of the data revealed 435 codes, 28 primary themes, 11 subcategories, and 3 main categories, as detailed in Table 2:

**Table 2.** The main categories, subcategories, and themes extracted from the interviews

Main Categories	Subcategories	Primary themes	Narrations
Emotional Pressures	Being deprived of the companionship	Developmental companionship	I wish he were with us longer and we grew up with him (Pa.5, P5).
		Solving life problems	When something goes wrong at home, I wish it were my father, and he would solve it himself (Pa.5, P7).
		Companionship in the community	I feel lonely even in a group (Pa. 4, P11).
	Deprivation of a supporter	Emotional support	When I feel sad and want to cry, if it were my father, I would calm down by hugging him (Pa.4, P11).
		Support in marriage	Anyone dares to propose to me (Pa.4, P12).
		Support in the future	If there are problems now or in the future, one would feel supported (Pa.3, P34).
	Mother's pressure	dependence on mother	I was very dependent on my mother (Pa.2, P26).
		Mother's overload	Everything was on my mother's shoulders (Pa.2, P14).
	Recalling the memories	The moment of death	I always thought about that moment (Pa.2, P20).
		Father's interests	When we cook food that my father likes, I cry in private (Pa.5, P10).
Being together		I always remember the things we used to do together (Pa.5, P10).	
Worry	Educational future	I am worried about my academic future. I wanted to be admitted to a good university and to know that my future is happy about it (Pa.4, P32).	
	Future career	I say, God, where can I find a job (Pa.4, P30).	
Social Pressures	The mistakes of others	Discrimination	We also like not to be differentiated from other people (Pa.1, P10).
		Interference	They interfere in our lives (Pa.1, P23).
		Harsh words	What family members say is annoying (Pa.1, P1).
		Leave a promise	I feel promise (Pa.5, P5).
	Concealment	The disclosure of the truth	When giving the consent last, or sneaking between the consents (Pa.4, P4).
		Telling the truth	It was very difficult for me to say that my father died when the teacher asked about him (Pa.3, P8).
	Inhibition	Self-control	When I am sad all night, I start crying to relieve my sadness, and everyone is sleeping (Pa.3, P5).
		Keeping up appearances	A person may behave as if she is very strong, but in private, she breaks down (Pa.4, P4).
	Limited relationships	People's sensitivity to the mother	My mother said if she went to my aunt's house and talked to my aunt's husband a little too much, people look at me a lot (Pa.2, P.6).
		Rejection	I was sad because we didn't have any relationships with anyone (Pa. 2, P.10).

Main Categories	Subcategories	Primary themes	Narrations
Economic Pressures	self-reliance	Self-content	We don't expect anything from others (Pa.5, P.5).
		Rejecting others' help	I told him I didn't want him to buy me anything (Pa.4, P.23).
		Lack of money	Sometimes we needed money but didn't have any money (Pa.3, P.9).
	Financial problems	Preparation of dowry	I think about how I should buy the dowry (Pa.3, P.36).
		Lack of a support system	Help people who have no father (Pa.2, P.28).

As shown in Table 2, the following categories were extracted from the lived experiences of girls of the psychological distress caused by the loss of their fathers: **Main category 1: Emotional pressures:** The emotional pressures include deprivation of companionship (developmental companionship, solving life problems, and companionship in the community), deprivation of a supporter (emotional support, support in marriage, support in the future), the pressure imposed on the mother (dependence on mother and mother's overload), recalling memories (the moment of death, father's interests, and being together) and worries (educational future and future career).

**Main category 2: Social pressures:** The social pressures were caused by the others' misconduct (discrimination, interference, harsh words, and rejection), concealment (the disclosure of the truth and expressing the truth), inhibition (self-control and keeping up appearances), and limited relationships (people's sensitivity to the mother and rejection).

**Main category 3: Economic pressures:** The economic pressures were related to self-reliance (self-content and rejection of help) and financial problems (lack of money, preparation of the dowry, lack of a support system).

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The participants in this study described psychological distress as one of the important issues faced by them after the loss of their father. They reported that emotional pressure, social pressure, and economic pressure as some problems leading to psychological distress in them. All the participants admitted that they faced the pressures caused by the problems after their father's loss. Some of these problems were the lack of affection and paternal support, the emergence of disturbing social relationships, and difficulty providing expenses and meeting basic life needs. These results were consistent with the findings reported by East et al. (2006). The father-child relationship is a unique bond affecting a child's life. It can shape the child's development, influence values, and predict his/her mental health (Rohner & Veneziano, 2001). Therefore, it seems that the lack of the father's support is very stressful for the child in her developmental stages.

According to the findings of this study, emotional pressure is caused by deprivation of companionship,

deprivation of a supporter, pressures imposed on the mother, recalling memories, and worries. All the participants in different situations expressed their longing and desire for their father's presence, especially when they were with their peers, and reported extensive emotional pressures experienced by them after the loss of their fathers. Most of the participants reported that they were deprived of a supporter and a source of paternal attention and affection. Most participants expressed displeasure with the increasing pressure on the mother to deal with life's problems. They also stated that they were very sad when remembering their father. Similar findings were reported in previous studies (Demidenko et al., 2015; Tau, 2020; Brown, 2018; Makofane, 2015) have been obtained, too. It can be argued that mourning is not the result of the lack of a periodic feeling but rather a long-term process associated with many different emotional experiences (Ratcliffe, 2023). Because parents are the closest people to the child and a haven to receive love, it is usually difficult for the child to accept their death in this sensitive period when children need more support from their parents due to their physical and mental vulnerability. Therefore, the loss of parents is a very stressful change, and people naturally feel emotional pressure in their absence (Steven et al., 2014).

According to the findings, social pressure is caused by others' misbehavior, concealment, inhibition, and limited relationships. Most of the participants pointed to maltreatment of the people around them, such as discrimination, interference, harsh words, and leaving a promise in the life affairs of a fatherless person. In addition, some participants admitted that although they pretended to be strong and happy, they often felt sad and miserable. Some of them also expressed a lack of psychological security in the form of restrictions on transportation, clothing, and talking about themselves and their mother. Azadeh and Tafte (2014) reported similar results to the finding. The rejection of female heads of the household, feelings of injustice to themselves and the unfavorable conditions of the past and present, and the prediction of a vague future contributed to reducing the feeling of happiness and caused psychological distress and depression in the participants.

The findings of the present study also showed that economic pressure was related to self-reliance and financial problems. Most of the participants reported that due to financial problems, they were unable to meet their basic living needs and buy dowry. Thus, they had to work to pay for the family's expenses, and some expressed their discomfort with the overload of the mother's economic and financial role. A majority of the participants also expressed their unwillingness to receive financial support from others and try to be self-reliant, as evident in previous studies (Azadeh & Tafte, 2014; Vespa et al., 2012; Babaie Fard, 2013; Damm & Dustmann, 2014). Children with absent fathers grow up in homes that struggle financially, maybe up to adulthood. In this situation, the mother will leave the house to support the living expenses. On the other hand, the income of one parent, especially the mother, is usually not enough to support the family. The lack of family income causes the child to live in poverty throughout her life, which can be due to various factors, including the lack of high-quality education. So, fatherless children may not do well enough academically compared to their peers to get into college despite trying hard. People who grow up without a father often face social-emotional problems throughout their lives. Any lack of social-emotional skills may indirectly lead to more financial problems caused by the absence of a father (Mancini, 2010).

This study examined the experiences of female adolescents. Thus, the lived experience of the psychological distress caused by the loss of the father may be different from the lived experience of boys. Some participants also did not report some issues to avoid drawing pity. The participants in this study were selected only from Tabriz. Thus, its findings may have limited generalizability to other contexts and groups. Nevertheless, psychologists should address psychological distress caused by the death of the father in psychological interventions with girls in local contexts. Moreover, fatherless female adolescents should receive material and spiritual support from support organizations to solve many of their problems, which have an economic origin. School counselors also need to pay special attention to the problems of these girls. In addition, researchers can conduct similar studies on male adolescents who have lost their fathers due to reasons other than natural death.

## 5. Ethical Considerations

### Compliance with ethical guidelines

In this research, ethical considerations include informed consent to participate in the study,

confidentiality of participants' identity, the right to withdraw from the study, and avoidance of plagiarism.

### Funding

This study was not financed by any organization.

### Authors' contributions

The first author designed and implemented the study, the second author was the supervisor, and the third author drafted the manuscript and translated it into English.

### Conflicts of interest

The authors stated that they have no conflict of interest with any person or organization.

### Acknowledgments

The authors are very grateful to all the participants, their parents, and school administrators.

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