

Living with Loss: Emotional Maturity and Resilience among Internal Migrant Students in Medan, Indonesia, Experiencing Paternal Loss due to Death

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ABSTRACT

The absence of a father due to death poses profound emotional challenges, particularly for young adults navigating life away from home. This study investigates how migrant university students in Medan, Indonesia who have lost their fathers develop emotional maturity and resilience amid such loss. Conducted using a qualitative descriptive method involving three female students aged 18–25 who met specific criteria related to father loss and migration status. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, and data were obtained via interviews, observations, and document analysis. The findings reveal that the process of adaptation was gradual and non-linear, marked by periods of vulnerability alongside personal growth. Cultural values such as responsibility, perseverance, and maintaining family honor played an important role in shaping coping strategies. This research highlights that emotional maturity and resilience are built through continuous adaptation rather than formed instantly. It provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of bereaved internal migrant students and underscores the need for culturally responsive psychosocial support within academic settings.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The loss of a father due to death is a deeply disruptive life event that can reshape a student's emotional, social, and academic functioning. Lopata states that the incompleteness of a family due to death is an inescapable reality of human life[1]. The loss of a parent due to death can cause stress for all family members, especially children [2]. Also, it changes the order of life and requires individuals to respond by adapting [3]. The death of a teenager's parent will elicit different reactions in each individual. These reactions include feelings of shock, disbelief, loss, sadness, and anger [4]. Reactions such as feelings of self-blame, anger, tendencies toward dangerous behavior, depression, suicide attempts, and changes in relationships with the surrounding environment may also occur [5].

In the Indonesian cultural context, the father is traditionally regarded as the head of the family and the primary authority figure responsible for setting household policies and norms [6]. He serves as a role model, decision-maker, and problem-solver, as well as the main provider. Additionally, he offers emotional support that fosters a sense of comfort, safety, and open communication within the family [7]. When the father dies, this role shifts entirely to the surviving parent.

The condition of students with single parents due to death will cause the surviving parent to have a dual role as both father and mother. Students who experience this certainly need time to adjust to their new life without a companion. Not all students who are children of single parents can easily adjust to this condition [8]. The loss of a parent, in this case, the father, due to death, can be a very challenging experience for a child. In this situation, the role of the mother as the sole caregiver becomes crucial in shaping the child's emotional maturity and resilience.

Emotional maturity is a vital aspect of individual development, especially when dealing with the loss of a parent. It involves recognizing, managing, and expressing emotions in an adaptive way. Individuals with emotional maturity are able to understand their feelings, regulate emotional reactions, and behave in ways that align with social expectations [9]. Chaplin defines emotional maturity as the ability to manage emotions without displaying childlike behavior[10], while Yusuf adds that it includes self-acceptance, tolerance, and the capacity to express emotions constructively [11].

According to Goleman, emotional maturity also involves self-awareness, empathy, and healthy relationship building[12]. For college

students who have lost their fathers, this ability becomes essential in coping with emotional stress and adjusting to academic and social demands while living away from home. Walgito states that controlled emotions help individuals think clearly and act objectively, which is important during periods of grief [13]. Hurlock explains that emotionally mature individuals are able to delay emotional expression until the right time and place, which promotes healthier social interactions [14]. Emotional maturity also supports effective coping and reduces the risk of harmful behaviors such as self-injury [15]. It helps individuals confront and process negative emotions like sadness or anger in healthy ways [4].

Furthermore, Emotional maturity is closely tied to resilience. Students who are emotionally mature are more likely to adapt, recover, and maintain stability despite adversity [12][16], making emotional maturity the fundamental basis of resilience. According to Kaplan and Baron, emotionally mature individuals can tolerate delays in gratification and adjust their expectations to fit changing situations. These qualities enable students not only to survive challenges but to grow from them [17]. Thus, emotional maturity forms the foundation of resilience, allowing students to adapt and thrive despite adversity.

Resilience represents an individual's ability to effectively cope with and adapt to challenging life circumstances, including trauma and significant stress [16]. This psychological construct encompasses both exposure to stressors and successful adaptation [18], enabling individuals to respond to difficulties in healthy, productive ways while maintaining a positive outlook [16]. Resilient individuals demonstrate key characteristics including self-reflective insight, emotional independence [19], the capacity for meaningful relationships, proactive initiative in problem-solving, creative adaptability, balanced humor, and strong moral foundations [20]. These qualities allow resilient people to learn from setbacks, utilize their strengths effectively, and approach challenges with wisdom and energy [21], making resilience particularly valuable for students navigating difficult life transitions such as parental loss while maintaining academic and social functioning.

In the context of fatherlessness, the loss of a father due to death significantly impacts students living away from home. These students must face changing roles and life challenges independently, compounded by migration-related stressors. Adapting to a new environment involves separation from familiar support systems and the need to manage

academic and social demands on one's own. Over time, these pressures may lead to feelings of homesickness and sadness, often prompting more frequent and emotionally charged contact with family [22]. The longing for one's hometown and difficulties adapting have been linked to increased risk of stress and depression among students [23]. When paternal loss occurs alongside these challenges, the psychological burden can intensify further.

The results of the initial interviews conducted by the researcher with three students who were raised by single mothers stated that loss is not an easy thing to go through. There are varied emotional responses to the loss of a father, such as deep sadness, sudden crying, and difficulty processing those feelings. This experience highlights unexpected emotions and emotional distress that require further attention, particularly regarding how the student manages grief and adapts to life as a migrant.

Previous studies have shown that the absence of a father can significantly affect psychological well-being. Research by Lubis et al. highlights that children who grow up without a father figure are more prone to emotional problems such as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. They are also at greater risk of engaging in deviant behaviors, and their academic performance tends to be lower than that of those with an active paternal presence. Moreover, fathers play a crucial role in shaping a child's ability to interact socially, solve problems, and regulate emotions [24]. These findings align with the study by Dewi et al., which reveals that university students who lost their fathers due to death experience intense psychological distress, including anxiety, loneliness, and low self-confidence. For these students, the absence of a father is seen as irreplaceable and deeply affects how they relate to others, underscoring the profound emotional void left behind [25]. Kurniawati found that students who have lost a parent tend to have lower levels of resilience because they have to face academic and social pressures without the full support of both parents. Limited economic and emotional support from single mothers also contributes to psychological instability [26].

Although many studies have examined the impact of parental loss, limited research has explored the intersection of emotional maturity and resilience, specifically among migrant students in Indonesia who have lost their fathers. Few studies address how the challenges related to migration influence the grieving process and the development of emotional regulation and adaptive coping.

Given the significance of emotional maturity and resilience in coping with such loss, this study aims to investigate these psychological constructs in depth within this population. The research seeks to answer how migrant students who have lost their fathers demonstrate emotional maturity and resilience. By addressing this gap, the study intends to contribute theoretically to developmental and clinical psychology and practically by providing valuable insights for students, educators, and future researchers, especially in designing relevant interventions and support for students from single-parent families.

2. METHOD

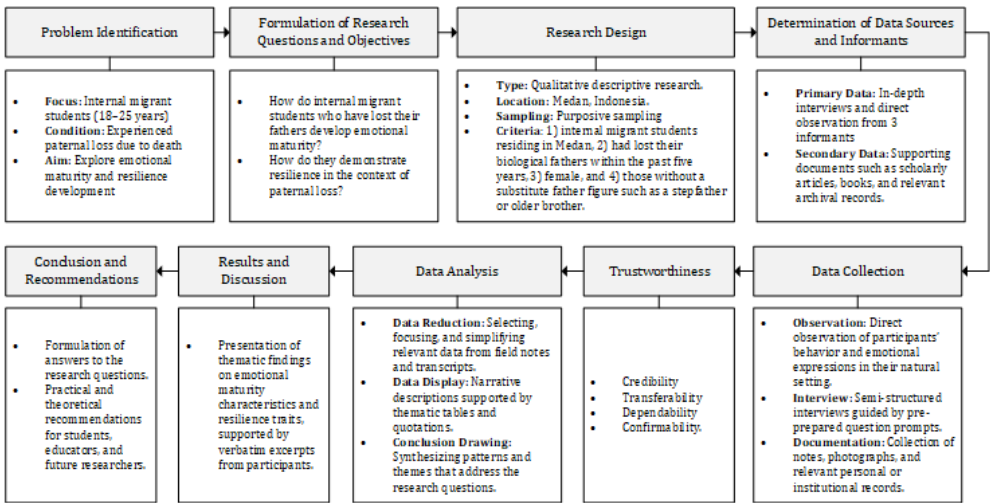


Figure 1. Research flow diagram

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to explore the emotional maturity and resilience of migrant university students who experienced father loss (fatherlessness). The descriptive qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to portray participants' lived realities in a rich and straightforward manner without imposing the strict theoretical framing of phenomenology or the systematic theory-building of grounded theory. This approach provided the flexibility to explore the breadth of experiences while still maintaining analytical rigor.

This research was conducted in Medan, Indonesia, focusing on three female undergraduate students who had lost their fathers within the past five years and were living away from their hometowns to pursue higher

education. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) female students aged in early adulthood (18–25 years), (2) identified as migrants currently studying in Medan, (3) had lost their biological father due to death within the last five years, and (4) had no stepfather or male parental substitute. The purposive sampling technique was applied to identify participants who could provide relevant and in-depth information aligned with the research objectives. The decision to limit the inclusion to losses within five years was made to ensure the grief experience remained sufficiently recent for participants to recall emotional and adaptive processes in detail, yet not so immediate as to impede participation due to acute distress. Due to the specific inclusion criteria and the difficulty in accessing eligible participants, the sample consisted of three female students. Despite the small sample size, data saturation was achieved through prolonged engagement with each participant, multiple interviews, and triangulation with additional informants such as friends or siblings. This purposive, information-rich sample allowed for a thorough and nuanced exploration of the phenomena, while recognizing that the transferability of findings may be limited to contexts with similar characteristics.

Data were collected using three primary methods: interviews, observation, and document review. The interview guide contained open-ended questions designed to elicit narratives about emotional experiences, coping strategies, and perceived changes after father loss. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, recorded with consent, and held in a private setting to ensure confidentiality. Observations were carried out during informal interactions, noting behavioral cues, emotional expressions, and social dynamics. Document analysis included reflective writings, photographs, and relevant personal records to complement and contextualize the verbal accounts.

Data analysis followed the thematic analysis framework of Miles and Huberman, encompassing three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing[24]. Transcripts were read repeatedly, then coded manually using a systematic labeling system. Codes were grouped into categories that reflected characteristics of resilience and emotional maturity, which were iteratively refined into overarching themes through constant comparison. The development of themes involved both inductive identification of emergent patterns and deductive alignment with the conceptual framework.

To ensure trustworthiness, this study applied Moleong's (cited in Angreini's criteria for qualitative research trustworthiness. Credibility was established through triangulation, where data from interviews, observations, and documents were cross-checked for consistency, as well as referential adequacy by maintaining detailed records for retrospective analysis[27]. Transferability was addressed by providing rich contextual descriptions, enabling readers to assess the applicability of results to similar settings. Dependability was achieved through regular supervisory reviews to verify the research process, while confirmability was ensured by maintaining reflexive field notes, documenting methodological decisions, and explicitly acknowledging the researcher's position as both an observer and interpreter, including the potential influence of personal assumptions and empathic engagement on data interpretation. These measures collectively strengthened the study's rigor and reliability.

Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the study. Written and verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, after providing a clear explanation of the study's objectives, procedures, potential emotional risks, and participants' rights. Each participant was informed that they could decline to answer any question, pause the interview, or withdraw from the study at any stage without any negative consequence. Given the sensitivity of grief-related topics, interviews were scheduled according to participants' emotional readiness, with pauses or rescheduling offered whenever signs of emotional distress were observed. The researcher remained attentive to verbal and non-verbal cues, offering empathetic responses and allowing moments of silence when needed. Where appropriate, participants were provided with information on counseling services or peer support networks to access after the interview. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained through the use of pseudonyms and secure storage of all materials, with access limited to the research team. Cultural sensitivity was upheld by respecting mourning practices and family values relevant to each participant's background, ensuring the discussion of loss and adaptation was conducted with compassion and dignity.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Result

This study aims to understand how emotional maturity and resilience are formed in migrant students who are experiencing

fatherlessness due to the loss of a father. Data collection took place over a one-month period, during which each of the three participants was interviewed twice and complemented by observations and document analysis. The participants, identified by pseudonyms CB, TD, and KR, were aged 18-25 and had lost their biological fathers within the past five years. All were living away from their hometowns for undergraduate study in Medan, Indonesia. The analysis identified two overarching themes: Emotional Maturity and Resilience, each containing several sub-themes aligned with Hurlock's [14][28] and Wolin's [20] frameworks.

3.1.1. Emotional Maturity

Emotional maturity, according to Chaplin, refers to a person's attainment of emotional development marked by self-control, tolerance, and the ability to express emotions constructively[10]. Hurlock [14][28] outlines four key characteristics of emotionally mature individuals: controlled and socially appropriate emotional expression, emotional stability, the capacity to critically evaluate situations, and the ability to achieve healthy catharsis. These traits equip individuals to manage emotional responses effectively, adapt to changing circumstances, and maintain psychological well-being. In this study, these characteristics emerged in participants' coping strategies following the loss of a father.

Controlled and socially appropriate emotional expression was a prominent sign of maturity across all participants, aligning with Hurlock's [14][28] view that mature individuals regulate and express emotions in socially acceptable ways. CB reflected this shift, stating, "Now, when I feel angry or disappointed, I try to sit down first, take a breath, write, or just stay quiet for a while... not as reactive as before", with TD and KR describing similar strategies. Such approaches echo Gross's emotion regulation model, particularly cognitive reappraisal and delaying impulsive expression[29], which have been linked to greater resilience and reduced psychological risk [30][31]. This ability to manage both positive and negative emotions strengthened not only their immediate responses but also their long-term psychological readiness to face future challenges.

Emotional stability was evident in the participants' consistent responses when facing stress or loss, reflecting Hurlock's [14][28] description of stable emotional reactions as a hallmark of maturity. KR articulated this steadfastness: "You have to stand on your own because there is a future to reach... like it or not, you must... if I cannot, then what

will happen to me?”, with TD and CB expressing similar determination. By maintaining emotional steadiness, the participants demonstrated psychological strength built through reflection, acceptance, and adaptation to the loss they experienced.

The capacity to critically evaluate situations was another marker of emotional maturity observed in all participants, consistent with Hurlock’s [14][28] view that mature individuals evaluate circumstances reflectively before responding. CB captured this shift from socially driven suppression to self-validation, stating, “I used to think, ‘Am I being too much?’ but now... I have boundaries and the right to protect my own feelings”, with TD and KR expressing similar realizations. This capacity reflects Bonanno and Burton’s concept of regulatory flexibility, whereby individuals adjust their emotion regulation strategies according to contextual demands rather than relying on a single habitual approach[32]. By consciously validating their emotions and selecting proportionate responses, the participants demonstrated heightened self-awareness and the ability to align emotional expression with personal needs and situational appropriateness.

The ability to achieve healthy catharsis emerged as a distinctive sign of emotional maturity among participants, reflecting Hurlock’s [14][28] view that mature individuals can channel internal emotional tension through healthy and constructive means. TD described this release through moments with close friends, sharing, “There was a moment when I was really down... finally, I told my story while crying. After that, I felt so relieved”, with CB and KR describing similar relief through anonymous writing and solitary calming rituals. These practices align with Doménech et al., who emphasize that strategies such as cognitive reappraisal and social disclosure enhance long-term emotional balance[31], and with Bonanno and Burton’s concept of regulatory flexibility, where individuals adaptively choose when and how to express emotions[32]. By applying such methods, the participants demonstrated not only emotional maturity but also a refined sensitivity to their inner states, using cathartic strategies that supported realistic and adaptive recovery.

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3.1.3. Resilience

Resilience, according to Reivich and Shatté, is the capacity to respond positively and adaptively when facing difficulties or traumatic experiences[16]. It enables individuals to maintain a constructive outlook, learn from challenges, and develop effective coping strategies. Wolin [20] identifies seven core characteristics of resilient individuals: insight, independence, relationships, initiative, creativity, humor, and morality. These traits enable individuals to learn from adversity, manage challenges effectively, and maintain psychological well-being. In this study, these qualities were reflected in participants' adaptive strategies following the loss of a father.

Insight emerged as a foundational element in participants' adaptation to father loss, aligning with Wolin's conceptualization of resilience characteristics [20] and supported by findings from Sarrionandia et al. that emotional intelligence facilitates resilience through adaptive appraisal[33]. The participants demonstrated reflective awareness, evaluating their feelings before deciding on a response. As TD expressed, "In the past, I was afraid of being called a baper, now I think

more about myself: 'what you feel is valid or not?' If yes, then you allow yourself to feel it.". Similar awareness was echoed by CB and KR, indicating a shift from externally driven validation toward self-acknowledged emotional legitimacy. This capacity reflects what Kong et al. describe as emotional literacy, enabling more effective regulation and problem-solving under stress[34].

Independence developed as participants navigated life decisions and daily responsibilities without paternal guidance. This growth mirrors Indriani's definition of independence as the ability to create emotional and physical distance from sources of distress[19], and aligns with Fletcher & Sarkar's emphasis on self-efficacy as a resilience driver[35]. KR articulated this transition: "Without a father, life feels less directed... now I have to be able to think for myself and have to know where I want to go without a father's direction.", with TD and CB describing similar shifts toward self-reliance in both practical tasks and future planning. These accounts illustrate the iterative process of self-directed action, fostering a sustained sense of control and confidence.

Relationships functioned as a vital pillar of resilience, providing emotional safety and reinforcing adaptive coping strategies. Consistent with Wolin's characterization of resilient individuals [20], CB described the importance of maintaining close connections with peers who offered non-judgmental listening. She shared, "Because they're willing to listen whenever I need to vent... I feel safe when they're around". This sense of psychological safety reflects findings by Sarrionandia et al. (2018) that social support mediates stress reduction and fosters emotional regulation[33], as well as Nasution et al., who highlight its role in strengthening self-efficacy[36]. In CB's case, such supportive relationships enabled her to reframe moments of emotional distress into opportunities for shared understanding, transforming loss from an isolating experience into one navigated alongside trusted companions.

Initiative emerged as a defining characteristic of the participants' resilience, reflecting a proactive stance in shaping their post-loss trajectories. CB described her decision to join a student exchange program in Sulawesi as a deliberate way to channel her energy toward growth rather than grief: "This activity helped me move on from sadness and keep striving to become a better person". This aligns with Indriani's definition of initiative as the willingness to take responsibility for one's own life and problems[19], as well as Wolin's [20] framing of it as actively creating new realities rather than passively enduring hardship. Research

by Satici and grounded in Bandura's social cognitive theory also underscores that proactive action correlates with higher levels of well-being among university students[37]. In CB's case, initiative served not only as a coping mechanism but also as a strategic pathway for reclaiming control, setting goals, and fostering personal growth in the aftermath of loss.

Creativity functioned as both an outlet for emotional expression and a strategic coping mechanism, enabling participants to process grief in constructive ways. TD, for instance, turned to drawing as a calming activity: "I usually try creative activities like drawing to relax", with CB and KR describing similar use of journaling, running, and music as means to channel emotions safely. Wolin [20] highlights creativity as the ability to generate multiple options and alternatives when facing life challenges, while McFadden and Basting emphasize its role in reframing traumatic experiences into forms that promote acceptance and healing[38]. Furthermore, Reizer et al. demonstrate that combining cognitive reappraisal with creative or humorous expression can enhance psychological well-being during periods of prolonged stress[39]. TD's creative practices, therefore, not only allowed for emotional release but also fostered psychological flexibility, transforming abstract feelings of loss into tangible forms of self-soothing and meaning-making.

Humor emerged as an adaptive coping strategy, enabling participants to alleviate emotional strain by embracing lighthearted moments. TD described deliberately watching funny videos to induce laughter and relieve tension: "I like watching funny videos just to make myself laugh". This reflects Wolin's [20] characterization of humor as a resilience trait, involving the ability to see life's brighter side and maintain emotional flexibility in the face of adversity. From a psychological perspective, TD's approach aligns with self-enhancing and affiliative humor styles, which have been shown to boost self-esteem and reduce depressive symptoms [40]. Similarly, Reizer et al. found that adaptive humor paired with optimism supports well-being during collective stress events[39]. For TD, humor functioned not as avoidance but as a healthy mechanism to remain emotionally connected, preserve motivation, and rebuild resilience incrementally.

Morality provided an inner compass for navigating post-loss challenges, guiding choices through values such as responsibility, perseverance, and integrity. KR articulated this stance clearly: "I believe

responsibility and rising back up are important. Even without a father, I hold on to those values because I want to be someone strong who doesn't give up". Indriani defines morality as a value orientation toward living better and more productively[19], a view consistent with Grotberg's resilience framework, where moral values form part of the "I am" domain that strengthens identity during hardship[41]. Empirical evidence from Fitri et al. also shows that moral commitment enhances intrinsic motivation and reduces depressive symptoms among orphaned students[42]. In KR's case, morality was not merely a personal ethic but a stabilizing force that anchored her sense of purpose, transforming grief into a deliberate pursuit of a meaningful and responsible life.

3.2. Discussion

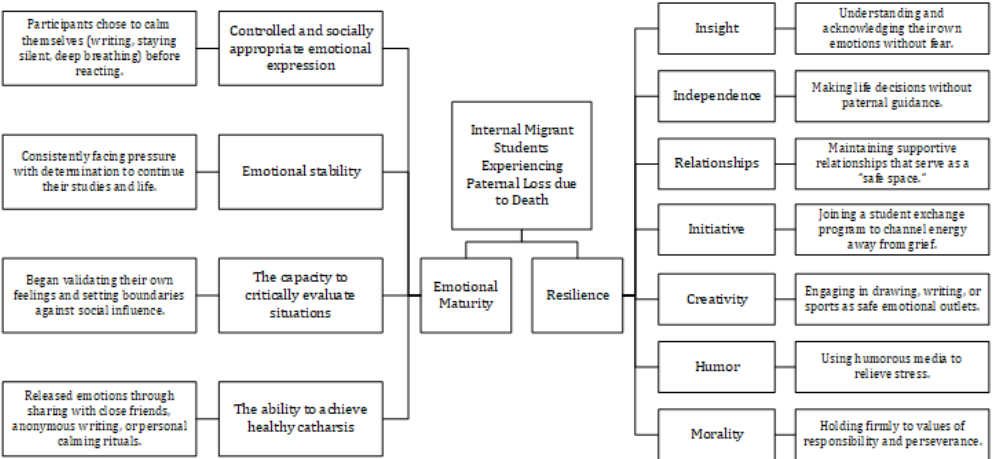


Figure 2. Thematic map of research findings

The findings of this study show that the development of emotional maturity and resilience in migrant students experiencing fatherlessness is not an immediate outcome but rather a gradual, iterative process shaped by emotional struggle, cognitive reframing, supportive relationships, and meaning-making. This aligns with Hurlock's [14][28] conceptualization of emotional maturity and Wolin's [20] framework of resilience, while also echoing Bonanno and Burton's theory of regulatory flexibility[32]. Participants' accounts illustrate how controlled emotional expression, emotional stability, insight, and self-reliance emerged over time through adaptive coping strategies such as creative expression, humor, and the cultivation of moral values. These findings are consistent with Doménech et al., who highlight that cognitive reappraisal and social

disclosure enhance long-term adjustment[31], and with Sarrionandia et al., who emphasize the mediating role of social support in emotional regulation[33]. However, the narratives also reveal that the trajectory of adaptation is non-linear, with periods of emotional vulnerability interspersed with moments of growth, underscoring the dynamic nature of resilience development.

While these results support prior literature linking bereavement to increased self-reliance and value consolidation (e.g., Grotberg, [41]; Fitri et al., [42]), they also resonate with findings from Manalu and Kusumiati, who found a significant positive relationship between social support and resilience in emerging adults aged 18–25 who experienced parental loss due to death, emphasizing that positive social connections help strengthen resilience during bereavement[43]. Similarly, Dewi, Sukmawati, and Mulyeni highlighted that paternal death is perceived as a permanent loss that causes deep sadness and emotional disturbance, which necessitates coping strategies such as seeking social support and engaging in academic activities to foster resilience[25].

Cultural values in Indonesia, particularly collectivism and strong familial obligations, appeared to influence how participants framed their grief, emphasizing responsibility, perseverance, and the preservation of family honor.

Nevertheless, these interpretations must be viewed in light of the study's limitations: the small and non-representative sample of three participants restricts the generalizability of the findings, the reliance on self-reported experiences may introduce recall bias, and the absence of inter-coder reliability measures limits methodological rigor. Future research should examine diverse cultural and migration contexts, integrate longitudinal designs, and consider counter-narratives or negative cases to better understand variability in resilience and emotional maturity development.

4. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the dynamics of emotional maturity and resilience among migrant university students who experienced father loss. In-depth interviews with three young women who lost their fathers during adolescence or early adulthood revealed that this loss profoundly shaped their worldview, thought patterns, and emotional management.

Regarding emotional maturity, the participants demonstrated conscious and purposeful emotional regulation, indicating a high level of emotional control. They showed emotional stability, allowing them to endure difficult circumstances without collapse. Furthermore, they developed critical thinking skills about their emotional states and social norms, alongside cultivating healthy cathartic processes to release emotions constructively. These elements reflect a sophisticated level of emotional development that underpins their ability to face ongoing challenges.

Following emotional maturity, resilience emerged naturally in their post-loss journeys. The participants exhibited insight through heightened awareness of their emotional patterns and reflections on past experiences. Their independence manifested through practical decisions made without paternal guidance. Healthy social relationships provided safe spaces for self-expression and emotional support. They engaged initiative and creativity, adaptively participating in programs, journaling, and other reflective activities. Humor and moral values played significant roles in maintaining emotional balance and fostering meaningful life direction.

Overall, the experience of losing a father did not simply lead to psychological decline; instead, it became a catalyst for profound psychological growth. The bereavement encouraged self-discovery, the formation of new value systems, and a more holistic consciousness in living. These findings extend existing theoretical frameworks by illustrating how emotional maturity and resilience develop interactively within the specific socio-cultural context of Indonesian migrant students navigating academic demands and familial loss. The study highlights the fluid, non-linear nature of adaptation, emphasizing culturally embedded values such as responsibility, perseverance, and social connectedness that uniquely shape coping processes.

Practically, the research suggests that institutional support should address these nuanced realities by providing grief-informed peer mentorship, creative reflective outlets, and culturally sensitive counseling aligned with students' lived experiences. Such targeted interventions arise directly from observed coping strategies rather than generic models.

Limitations include the small and homogenous sample, which restricts the generalizability of results. The reliance on self-reported data may also introduce bias. Future research should consider broader, more

diverse populations and longitudinal designs to better capture evolving emotional maturity and resilience trajectories over time.

By integrating rich qualitative narratives with established psychological theories, this study contributes both conceptual insights and practical guidance for supporting bereaved migrant students. It enriches developmental psychology literature and informs institutional efforts to foster emotional well-being and adaptive capacities in vulnerable student populations.

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