Research Paper

Echoes of Absence: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Psychology Students without Paternal Presence

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Abstract

This qualitative research investigates the lived experiences of Psychology students who grew up without paternal presence, with emphasis on emotional development, attachment patterns, and identity formation. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), an advanced qualitative approach, was carefully employed to capture the depth and complexity of participants' meaning-making. Seven students aged 18–21 were selected through homogeneous purposive sampling, and semi-structured interviews revealed five (5) emergent themes: (1) Strength, reflecting resilience, self-reliance, and responsibility; (2) Relational Dynamics, highlighting interactions with family and peers; (3) Inner Disconnection, capturing emotional detachment and difficulty expressing vulnerability; (4) Adaptive Coping, describing strategies for navigating challenges of father absence; and (5) Emotional Complexities, encompassing conflicting emotions arising from paternal loss. Grounded in Bowlby's Attachment Theory, the study demonstrates how paternal absence influences emotional regulation, relational dynamics, and self-concept. Participants reported premature independence, emotional suppression, and relational distance, yet also demonstrated resilience and personal growth. Many used their experiences as motivation to pursue psychology, aiming to support others with similar backgrounds. This study contributes to qualitative psychology by deepening the understanding of attachment disruptions and identity development in emerging adulthood. It extends phenomenological research on father absence by highlighting how psychology students' reflective capacities shape distinct interpretations of paternal loss. While paternal absence presents risks such as emotional instability and identity confusion, it can also foster adaptive coping, heightened self-awareness, and a drive for transformation. These insights offer implications for counseling support, psychology education, and future qualitative inquiry, particularly in contexts where paternal absence is a widespread social and cultural reality.

Keywords: *Paternal Absence, Attachment Theory, Identity, Emotional, Resilience, Experiences*

INTRODUCTION

Parents have a vital role in shaping a child's development. Their presence and relationship with the child influence mental, physical, social, and emotional growth, as well as overall well-being (Amodia-Bidakowska et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020). However, not all children grow up with a father figure in their lives. When a father is absent from home, important areas of responsibility may be affected. These include the roles that fathers often play in supporting a child's growth, shaping identity, and maintaining family stability as providers, protectors, teachers, role models, and emotional guides (Evans & Jakiela, 2024).

Research has shown that father absence can have developmental consequences. For example, Guo et al. (2020) demonstrated that father absence is linked to earlier menarcheal timing through psychosocial stress, highlighting how paternal absence can disrupt developmental trajectories. Similarly, Vera Rueda (2021) emphasized broader psychosocial impacts of paternal absence in early childhood, including difficulties with emotional regulation, attachment, and

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academic performance.

National surveys confirm that paternal absence is a significant reality among Filipino youth. According to the University of the Philippines Population Institute (2022), findings from the 2021 Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Studies revealed that only 67% of young Filipinos were raised by both parents. Specifically, only 4% lived with their fathers and 18% lived only with their mothers, highlighting a significant paternal absence. Regionally, in CALABARZON, 20.6% of youth were raised by their mothers, while only 5.1% were raised by their fathers, reflecting the same patterns of paternal absence observed nationwide.

In the Philippine socio-cultural context, paternal absence is shaped by family norms, gender roles, and migration. Fathers are often expected to serve as providers and protectors, while mothers assume the role of primary nurturers, so their absence disrupts identity formation, emotional security, and household stability. Labor migration further complicates this dynamic, as financial support may be present, but emotional bonds are weakened (Albert et al., 2023).

Paternal presence, defined by Blass (n.d.), refers to a father's emotional involvement, like how he acts, responds, and connects with a child. This absence can be understood through Bowlby's Attachment Theory, which emphasizes the innate human need for closeness and connection with caregivers (ICSW, 2023). Attachment theory helps explain why some people are able to build strong, trusting relationships, while others find it hard to open up or fear getting close (Cherry, 2025).

Existing studies on paternal absence largely focus on general populations, children, or adolescents, often examining outcomes such as emotional difficulties, behavioral problems, or academic performance. In recent years, qualitative studies have offered deeper perspectives on how paternal absence is personally experienced beyond its general effects. For instance, Kurata et al. (2024) found that father absence among secondary school students in Lesotho led to emotional instability, low self-esteem, academic challenges, and economic hardship, yet many demonstrated resilience by coping through support from peers, caregivers, and community activities. In the Philippine context, Escoton et al. (2025) conducted a qualitative study on paternal absence among students, revealing its impact on psychosocial development through disrupted attachment patterns and challenges in self-concept. Similarly, Lotino (2025) examined paternal absence and its effects on academic achievement, revealing how students relied on adaptive coping strategies and alternative support networks.

Despite these contributions, very few studies have focused on psychology students, whose reflective capacities and training in mental health may shape distinct interpretations of these experiences. There is a clear population gap: very few studies explore Psychology students who grew up without a father, and how their academic training in mental health and developmental psychology may influence their experiences. Psychology students may possess heightened self-awareness and reflective capacities, which could shape how they interpret and cope with paternal absence. This study, therefore, seeks to examine the lived experiences, coping strategies, and relational dynamics of psychology students who grew up without paternal presence, offering qualitative insights into attachment disruptions and identity formation as framed by Bowlby's Attachment Theory.

Research Objectives and Research Questions:

To guide the study, the researchers formulated clearly defined research objectives to maintain focus and coherence in exploring the lived experiences of Psychology students without paternal presence. Specifically, the objectives were: (1) to describe the lived experiences of Psychology students in the context of paternal absence; (2) to identify the essential themes emerging from their narratives regarding attachment, coping strategies, and identity formation;

and (3) to generate recommendations grounded in participants' accounts that may inform culturally responsive counseling and psychology education. To further focus the inquiry, the study was guided by the central question: *"What is the essence of the lived experience of Psychology students without paternal presence?"*

Consequently, the research was guided by the corollary questions, as follows:
1. How do Psychology students without paternal presence describe their lived experiences?
2. What essential themes emerge from Psychology students' accounts regarding emotional regulation, relational dynamics, and meaning-making?
3. Based on the findings of the study, what recommendations may be drawn to inform counseling support and psychology education?

LITERATURE REVIEW
Paternal Roles in Psychological Development

In this portion of the study, the literature shows how fathers play an essential role in the psychological growth of their children. Choi and Pyun (2021) stated that consistent father involvement in early life leads to stronger emotional well-being, better social skills, and higher academic performance, stressing that a father's role is not only about financial provision but also about emotional support. This was supported by the findings of Puglisi et al. (2024), who explained that engaged fathers help children develop coping skills, resilience, and problem-solving abilities, suggesting that father absence may increase vulnerability to emotional struggles. Furthermore, Jeong et al. (2024) emphasized that higher paternal involvement is positively associated with children's socio-emotional outcomes, particularly in resource-limited settings, while Cimino et al. (2024) showed through a longitudinal intervention that father-child interaction strengthens emotional regulation and lowers the risk of psychological symptoms. On the other hand, Liu et al. (2023) revealed that father absence in depressed youths was associated with higher hostility, and this link was mediated by lower self-esteem and frustration tolerance, underscoring the psychological risks that can emerge without paternal support. Overall, these studies reveal that paternal presence is central to children's psychological development, and its absence can create challenges that affect their emotional, social, and mental well-being.

On top of the recent studies continuing to affirm that paternal absence significantly affects the psychological development of children and adolescents. Gagelonia et al. (2025) also conducted a phenomenological study on children of overseas Filipino workers. This revealed long-term emotional consequences such as internalized sadness, frustration, and identity confusion. These youth often develop coping mechanisms like emotional suppression or idealization of absent figures, including that of a father, which may mask deeper psychological distress. Kucukkaragoz (2023) synthesized global literature and found that father absence correlates with diminished mental health, reduced academic motivation, and increased behavioral challenges, especially in socioeconomically vulnerable populations. Similarly, Kurata et al. (2024) explored the lived experiences of secondary school students in Lesotho, showing that father absence contributes to emotional instability, poor self-regulation, and social maladjustment. These findings collectively suggest that paternal absence is not merely a familial gap but a developmental risk factor that can shape emotional resilience, identity formation, and behavioral outcomes across diverse cultural contexts. Overall, these studies reveal that paternal presence is central to children's psychological development and its absence can affect their emotional, mental, and social well-being. This sets the stage for examining how father absence shapes identity processes, which are best understood through the lens of Attachment theory.

Attachment Theory and Relational Patterns

Attachment Theory, originally developed by Bowlby and later refined by Ainsworth, serves as the primary theoretical benchmark for this study, offering a lens to interpret how paternal absence shapes children's psychological development and emphasizes that humans are inherently driven to form emotional bonds with their caregivers. Such early attachments provide the preparation for future relationships and play a critical role in shaping emotional regulation, identity formation, and the meaning individuals assign to their relational experiences. Secure attachment nurtures resilience, trust, and adaptive coping, while broken or absent bonds often give rise to maladaptive emotional regulation, insecurity, and identity confusion. In particular, when paternal attachment is disrupted, children may struggle with interpreting self-worth, emotional insecurity, and feelings of abandonment, all of which negatively shape their developmental growth (Cherry, 2025; All4Kids, 2025). In line with this, Liu et al. (2023) emphasized that children growing up without a father may also develop low self-esteem and low frustration tolerance, a combination that can manifest as increased hostility in social interactions. Furthermore, Sosia (2024) added that the absence of a father figure creates significant communication barriers, particularly in forming and maintaining trust and openness in relationships. This is further supported by the study of Zuliani, Anisah, and Iswinarti (2024), who found that children without a father figure often struggle with establishing healthy relationships with the opposite sex and are more vulnerable to psychological issues. These studies collectively highlight that the emotional and relational challenges experienced by fatherless children are deeply rooted in disrupted attachment and continue to affect them well into adolescence and adulthood.

Identity Formation and Emotional Regulation in Emerging Adults

Emotion regulation refers to the capacity to manage and control one's emotional state. It can include strategies such as reframing difficult situations to lessen anger or anxiety, concealing outward expressions of sadness or fear, or concentrating on positive reasons to maintain happiness and calmness. Children with no father figure frequently experience low self-esteem and feelings of abandonment. According to Xiang and Zhou (2023), the lack of a father figure can affect a child's relationships long into adulthood by impeding the development of stable bonds. Smorti et al. (2024) said that both parenting and impairment in emotion regulation have emerged as important predictors of emotional and behavioral difficulties among adolescents. However, Puglisi et al. (2024) stated that when factors about the evaluation of father engagement and emotion regulation were considered, substantial associations between greater father involvement and more adaptive emotion regulation emerged. Moreover, Gagelonia et al. (2025) found that lack of stable attachment bonds can impede a child's capacity to develop positive peer relationships, hence supporting Rosall and Arianti (2025) claim that losing a father figure in a family can have a diverse impact on their adolescence, saying that many face identity formation dilemmas that may lead to attachment issues and develop low self-esteem. Thus, Attachment Theory provides a framework for interpreting these findings: paternal absence disrupts secure attachment, which in turn undermines meaning-making processes, impairs emotional regulation, and complicates identity formation. This continuity underscores the developmental risks of father absence while situating them within a broader theoretical context that explains both immediate and long-term psychological outcomes.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed an exploratory and interpretive qualitative research design, specifically Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The study is exploratory because it seeks to understand an underexplored phenomenon, the lived experiences of psychology students without paternal presence, rather than to test hypotheses. It is interpretive in nature, consistent

with IPA's epistemological assumption that meaning is co-constructed through participants' reflections and researchers' interpretations. IPA is particularly appropriate for exploring how individuals make sense of emotionally significant life experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Smith et al., 2009).

The participants in this study were young adults, specifically psychology students aged 18–21, who grew up under paternal absence from birth to middle childhood and were residing in Batangas during the academic year 2025–2026. According to Ask the Scientists (n.d.), individuals aged 18–21 are in the final stage of adolescence, a period in which beliefs, identity, and values become more consolidated. This developmental stage enables participants to engage in reflective meaning-making, making them well-positioned to articulate how paternal absence influenced their emotional growth, attachment patterns, and sense of self. All participants voluntarily shared their lived experiences. To ensure confidentiality and compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173, 2012), pseudonyms were used and identifying information was excluded.

Selection of participants was conducted through homogeneous purposive sampling, specifically targeting psychology students without paternal presence. This sampling strategy is consistent with IPA methodology, which emphasizes small, homogeneous samples to allow for in-depth, idiographic analysis rather than breadth or generalization. Participants shared key characteristics, including paternal absence, enrollment in the same academic program, and attendance at the same institution. Recruitment was conducted through Facebook posts containing the study title, objectives, inclusion criteria, and researcher contact information. In line with IPA norms, the sample size of seven (7) participants was deemed appropriate, as IPA typically involves 6–10 participants to achieve depth of analysis. Ellis (2016), as cited in Akilith (2023), notes that six (6) to twenty-five (25) participants are generally sufficient to reach data saturation. Saturation was achieved as recurring meanings and patterns emerged across interviews, with no substantially new insights arising in later narratives.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, a method central to IPA as it allows participants to narrate experiences in their own words while enabling the researcher to explore emotional meanings and interpretations. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted face-to-face in a private setting to ensure comfort and confidentiality. The interview guide was reviewed and validated by a subject matter expert with recognized expertise in psychology and credentials as a Registered Psychometrician. The guide covered domains such as experiences of paternal absence, emotional well-being, family and relational dynamics, identity formation, coping strategies, and motivation as psychology students. The semi-structured format was chosen to balance consistency across participants with flexibility for probing personally meaningful experiences.

After data collection, interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis followed the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis process, involving repeated reading of transcripts, initial exploratory noting, development of emergent themes, clustering of related themes within each case, and cross-case analysis to identify shared patterns while preserving individual meaning. QDA Miner Lite was used to assist in organizing and coding data; however, the software supported, but did not replace, the researchers' interpretive engagement with the narratives.

To ensure rigor, the study adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness framework, addressing credibility, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity. Credibility was enhanced through verbatim transcription and member checking, wherein participants reviewed their transcripts for accuracy. Dependability was supported by a standardized interview protocol and transparent documentation of analytic procedures. Confirmability was ensured through an audit trail of coding and theme development, grounding findings in participants' accounts.

Reflexivity was practiced as the researchers acknowledged their positionality as psychology students and reflected on how their perspectives may influence interpretation.

This research was conducted in alignment with institutional ethical protocols. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the school's Dean of Studies, and informed consent was secured before data collection. Trauma-informed care principles were applied during interviews to promote emotional safety and respect, given the sensitivity of paternal absence. Upon completion, transcripts were returned to participants for member checking. Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used solely for language refinement and translation assistance, while interpretation, analysis, and ethical responsibility remained fully with the researchers, ensuring that AI use did not compromise data validity or integrity.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The table below presents the profiles of seven participants who aligned with the criteria established by the researchers. In accordance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173, 2012) all personal information has been handled with confidentiality and used solely for academic purposes. The participants of this study are seven (7) psychology students aged 18 to 21, consisting of four (4) males and three (3) females, residing in Batangas, Philippines, during the academic year 2025–2026. Each participant satisfied the inclusion criteria, specifically having experienced the absence of a paternal figure from birth to eight (8) years old. They voluntarily shared their lived experiences regarding the absence of a paternal figure within their families, offering insights into how this shaped their emotional resilience, coping mechanisms, and family relationships. According to Ellis (2016), as cited by Akilith et al. (2023), six (6) to twenty-five (25) participants are sufficient to reach data saturation. In this study, saturation was reached with seven (7) participants as recurring themes and patterns became evident, and no new significant insights emerged. In compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173, 2012), participants' identities are kept confidential and are represented through code names in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of Participants

Participant	Age	Age at Paternal Absence
PAX 1	20	Since birth
PAX 2	20	3
PAX 3	20	8
PAX 4	21	5
PAX 5	20	7
PAX 6	21	8
PAX 7	18	Since birth

The data collected from the investigation of participants' personal lived experience and the investigation of the provided similar experiences were among the methods of inquiry. As a result, the research was guided by the central question, that is:

"*What is the essence of the lived experience of Psychology students who do not have paternal presence?*"

Consequently, the research was guided by the corollary questions**:**

Corollary Question: How do psychology students without paternal presence describe their experience?

Interview Question 1: How would you describe your experience of growing up without a father?

Upon being asked, both PAX 1 and PAX 2 shared similar experiences of growing up in mother-led households, which required them to develop early independence and self-reliance. PAX 1 often paused before responding, as if carefully recalling his experiences, and his occasional twisting of the mouth, eyes, or cheeks suggested mixed emotions as he described stepping into father-like roles, making decisions, supporting siblings, and learning life skills independently. He further shared that he engaged in part-time work to provide for his personal needs, deliberately minimizing reliance on his mother for financial support. In contrast, PAX 2 spoke with continuous responses, yet his faint, recurring smile hinted at emotions not fully verbalized, reflecting both resilience and a quiet acceptance of his situation. He emphasized that he assumed responsibilities traditionally fulfilled by a father, carrying out tasks and roles within the household that demanded increased maturity and accountability. For both, the absence of a paternal figure pushed them to mature early, becoming self-reliant through their mothers' strength and example. These narratives, reinforced by their observed expressions and gestures, reveal how children often internalize the emotional gaps left by absent or emotionally distant parents, leading them to take on caregiving roles prematurely. This was evident in their responses when they stated that:

> *"...being independent and as someone with no father my mother played both the father and the mother role in the family."* —PAX 1

> "...as a man, I'm the one who stood up as a father. I'm the one who fulfills the role or tasks that a father should do…" —*PAX 2*

These responses reflect current studies showing that growing up without a father can lead to difficulties in family communication, relationship security, and emotional connection (Iwanski et al. 2021). According to Attachment Theory, early paternal absence can affect the formation and maintenance of emotional bonds, trust, and communication styles within the family system Macdonald et al. (2021). Thus, the participants' narratives illustrate how the absence of a paternal figure reshapes attachment dynamics that lead to premature independence and self-reliance challenges and adaptive outcomes rooted in the interplay between attachment needs and environmental demands. This adaptation is demonstrated by the stories of PAX 1 and PAX 2, who both recount taking on fatherly duties and exhibiting resilience through their mothers' dual roles, showing that attachment and care are reorganized in ways that promote resilience and self-sufficiency rather than completely lost in the absence of a paternal presence. This finding extends Phasha et al. (2022), who found adolescent boys in father-absent homes experienced both emotional strain and adaptive resilience.

Interview Question 2: How does the absence of a father influence your relationship with your family members?

The responses of PAX 1 and PAX 2 highlight how the absence of a father affects relational dynamics within the family. PAX 1 described experiencing emotional disconnection, noting that the lack of a paternal figure left them without someone to confide in, often resulting in handling challenges independently. Likewise, PAX 2 shared that paternal absence created distance and

limited communication within the family, which fostered a sense of isolation. Both accounts reflect distress, yet the paradox lies in how this disconnection also fostered self-reliance. The absence of paternal presence fractured belonging, but it also reorganized relational space into self-containment. Thus, paternal absence is lived as both relational rupture and adaptive withdrawal. This was evident in their responses when they stated:

> *"Ahh, it's like I have no one to confide in, so I keep everything to myself…when you want to tell them something but there's really no one to talk to, it ends up being just yourself"* — PAX 1

> *"…I just became more distant to my father's side, I no longer feel comfortable with them, because ever since I lost my father, they haven't approached us anymore."*— PAX 2

These experiences are consistent with recent research showing that father absence is associated with difficulties in forming healthy family relationships, insecure relational attachments, and emotional withdrawal (Anesti & Abdullah, 2024). This aligns with Soler et al. (2021), who explored troubling memories of fathers and found relational withdrawal as a recurring theme. The findings show withdrawal as adaptive in emerging adulthood. From the perspective of Attachment Theory, these findings suggest that early paternal absence can influence the development of emotional bonds, trust, and communication patterns within the family. The narratives of PAX 1 and PAX 2 illustrate how children adapt to relational gaps by developing self-reliance while navigating family interactions, demonstrating that relational dynamics are reshaped, not entirely lost, when a father figure is absent.

Interview Question 3: How does not having a paternal presence affect your emotional well-being?

Divergence is most evident. PAX 3 and PAX 4 reported emotional unavailability and detachment, interpreting absence as distress and numbness. Yet paradoxically, this detachment became a protective adaptation—normalizing absence to shield against pain. Emotional well-being is lived as both instability and survival: paternal absence destabilizes bonds, but it also teaches participants to disengage as a way of enduring unmet attachment needs. This was evident in their response when they responded:

> "It's like it affected the way I socialize with people, like more on being with myself." —*PAX 2*
> *"Just like I mentioned earlier, I became emotionally unavailable." —PAX 3*

> *"I just grew up not really caring about those kinds of things anymore."—PAX 4*

Growing up without a paternal figure, especially during the early years, can lead to emotional instability. A study conducted by Kurata et al. (2024) found that students experiencing father absence reported emotional instability, including withdrawal and difficulty forming relationships. Particularly, Cimino (2024), as cited in Kucukkaragoz (2023), states that father absence compromises the child's ability to form secure relationships in later life, perpetuating patterns of instability and emotional dysregulation. This aligns with the lens of attachment theory, which posits that early disruptions in caregiver relationships can lead to insecure attachment and long-term emotional difficulties.

Interview Question 4: How does your experience without a father shape the way you see yourself or your identity?

Identity formation revealed paradoxical trajectories. PAX 3 linked paternal absence to uncertainty about fatherhood and even to his sexual orientation, interpreting absence as confusion and vulnerability. PAX 7, meanwhile, anticipated rejection, shaping identity around fear of non-acceptance. Yet both accounts show that absence is not only destructive, it also provokes reflection, forcing participants to confront who they are and who they might become. This anticipatory rejection reveals how paternal absence can influence not only how individuals see themselves but also how they expect others to perceive them. This was evident in the participants' responses when they stated that:

> *"To be honest, because I didn't really feel my father's presence growing up, I also don't know how I'll be as a father in the future… I think that might be one of the reasons why my sexual orientation is bisexual." — PAX 3*

> *"Maybe if he were here and saw who I am now—because his religion is different—it's possible that he wouldn't accept who I am and what I've become."—PAX 7*

Recent literature supports these reflections. Davis (2023) highlights that father absence can lead to paternal deprivation, emotional instability, and impaired identity development, particularly when children lack secure attachment figures. Kurata et al. (2024) emphasize that paternal absence affects emotional well-being and identity, often leading to social withdrawal and confusion about self-worth. Additionally, NeuroLaunch (2024) explains that attachment theory provides a framework for understanding how the absence of a father disrupts the formation of secure emotional bonds, which are critical for identity development. This finding extends Harper and Shaw (2024), who found that men raised without fathers redefined fatherhood roles in adulthood. The participants nuance this by showing that identity reconstitution begins earlier, in emerging adulthood, where absence provokes reflection on sexuality, belonging, and future fatherhood. These reflections align with Attachment Theory, which posits that those early relationships—especially with primary caregivers—form the foundation of emotional regulation and identity development. The absence of a father figure can disrupt the formation of secure attachments, leading to emotional dysregulation, conditional self-worth, and identity confusion.

Interview Question 5: How does growing up without a father influence your perspective and motivation as a psychology student?

Growth and distress diverge most clearly. PAX 2 and PAX 5 reframed paternal absence as inspiration, channeling loss into motivation to study psychology and help others. In contrast, PAX 6 described hopelessness, questioning her reason to continue. Yet even in despair, she found meaning in the support of others. This paradox reveals that paternal absence is lived as both wound and catalyst: for some, it inspires resilience and purpose; for others, it evokes despair that only communal support can soften. Growth and distress are not opposites but intertwined responses to the same absence. The participants highlighted this in their responses, explaining that:

> *"I became more motivated to grow stronger and pursue personal growth, especially as I began to understand things more deeply, like my experiences, as I'm pursuing this program." — PAX 2*

"On the other hand, this also served as my inspiration to take this program, Psychology, to help others who experienced the same thing as mine and make them feel that they're not alone." — PAX 5

According to the participants' reflections, their attachment styles and personal growth are deeply affected by their father's absence. Fatherlessness is linked to traits like emotional detachment but also stimulates motivation for self-definition and growth (Poernomo et al. 2024). Individuals often respond by building resilience and developing a clearer sense of identity. They use their experiences to better understand themselves and their surroundings. This connects to the participants' choice to turn emotional challenges into meaningful lives. This challenges deficit-only models by showing that absence can inspire vocational purpose in emerging adulthood, echoing Soler et al. (2021), who noted that father absence can provoke both troubling memories and transformative meaning-making. This finding extends their strong drive to be better than their father, demonstrating that paternal absence not only affects the participant negatively but also strengthens them to overcome challenges through self-awareness, emotional maturity, and a motivated life.
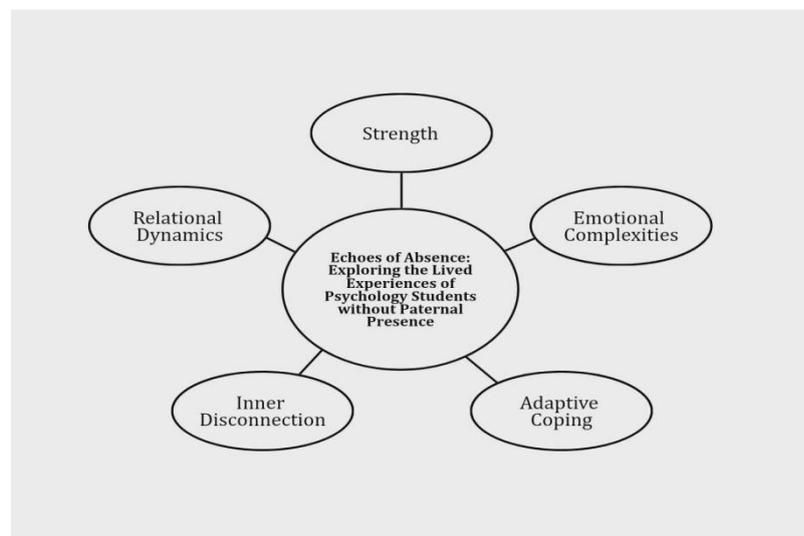

Figure 1. Themes of the Lived Experiences of Psychology Students with Paternal Absence

Corollary Question: What themes emerged from the responses of Psychology Students with Paternal Absence?

On the responses from psychology students, the researchers identified five (5) themes. These include: (1) Strength; (2) Relational Dynamics; (3) Inner Disconnection; (4) Adaptive Coping; and (5) Emotional Complexities.

Strength

The essence of strength is lived not as simple toughness but as a reorganization of identity in the absence of paternal presence. Participants experienced strength as both burden and foundation: independence became a defining feature of their being. When interviewed, PAX 1 described how his mother taught him to rely on himself by acting as both a mother and a father, making independence both a necessity and a learned behavior. Similarly, PAX 2 described assuming

paternal responsibilities at a young age, expressing how he took on tasks typically handled by a father, learning them on his own without a father's guidance. This was evident in their statements:

> *"Being independent, and since there's no father figure, it's like my mother takes on both the roles of a father and a mother in the family."—PAX 1*

> *"I'm the one who takes on the tasks that, you know, are usually done by a man or a father. I grew up that way—no one taught me; I just learned on my own."—PAX 2*

Their words reveal that strength is not merely coping; it is the restructuring of attachment, where resilience emerges through role assumption and maternal duality. Strength is lived as the paradox of suppressed vulnerability and forged identity. From the perspective of Attachment Theory, this development of strength can be interpreted as an adaptive response to disrupted attachment patterns caused by paternal absence. A person's sense of emotional control and security is greatly influenced by their father, who is one of the main attachment figures. Furthermore, studies on family resilience reveal that self-efficacy derived from early life traumas and ongoing mother care often creates such strength (Shadik & Shafer, 2023).

Relational Dynamics

The essence of relational dynamics is lived as fractured belonging. The absence of a father reorganized communication into silence and distance, reshaping family bonds into fragile threads. The participants revealed that such an absence often disrupts open communication, trust, and emotional connection among family members. PAX 1 shared a sense of emotional distance, expressing the difficulty of not having someone to confide in during challenging times. This led to a tendency to keep emotions private and rely solely on oneself. Similarly, PAX 2 described feeling estranged from her father's side of the family, noting that the lack of paternal presence resulted in fading closeness and less interaction over time. This was evident in their statements:

> *"...it's like I have no one to turn to, it's like you're keeping everything to yourself. Like when you want to run to them, you have no one to talk to, so you only have yourself."—PAX 1*

> *"I've become more distant from my father's side of the family. We no longer feel comfortable around them because ever since my father is gone, they stopped approaching us." —PAX 2*

These accounts reveal that paternal absence is not only the loss of a figure but the reconstitution of relational space, where trust and openness collapse into self-containment. Relational dynamics are lived as withdrawal, where belonging is both desired and denied. This aligns with Attachment Theory, which suggests that early experiences with caregivers shape one's ability to form secure and trusting relationships later in life. When a paternal figure is absent, individuals may struggle to build and sustain emotional connections, leading to avoidance or self-reliance as a protective mechanism. Supporting this, Yi (2020) emphasized that the absence of a father can disrupt emotional security and hinder the development of stable interpersonal relationships, influencing how individuals connect and relate to others.

Inner Disconnection

The essence of inner disconnection is lived as protective numbness. Participants described withdrawing into solitude, preferring detachment over vulnerability. When interviewed, PAX 2 revealed a tendency to withdraw from other people, preferring solitude over social interaction. This

pattern reflects emotional disconnection, suggesting that the reduced social engagement may be a coping response to the absence of a paternal figure. Similarly, PAX 7 described her experience as emotionally disconnected. It reflects the coping mechanism rooted in emotional detachment, where the participant has learned to function without fully engaging with her inner emotional world. This emotional distancing may serve as a defense against unmet attachment needs, especially in the absence of a father figure. Over time, such avoidant tendencies can be developed, contributing to their experience of inner disconnection. It was evident in their responses when they stated that:

"It's like it affected the way I socialize with people, like more on being with myself."—PAX 2

"Not really, I'm not affected because I'm used to it."—PAX 7

These narratives reflect traits of avoidant attachment, where individuals suppress emotional needs and withdraw from relationships to protect themselves from pain. This disconnection is not passive; it is an experiential structure where unmet attachment needs are managed through avoidance. Inner disconnection is lived as survival, a way of functioning without fully engaging with one's emotional world, revealing how absence becomes internalized as silence. The participants' preference for solitude and emotional numbness suggests a coping strategy shaped by early paternal absence. This aligns with Attachment Theory, which links disrupted early bonds to emotional detachment and difficulty accessing one's inner world (Domic-Siede et al., 2024).

Adaptive Coping

The essence of adaptive coing is lived transformation. Rather than viewing paternal absence as purely negative, participants reframed it as an opportunity for growth and self-reliance. PAX 1 expressed how the experience shaped him to become more independent. PAX 2 echoed this sentiment, reflecting a strong sense of self-direction and resilience. PAX 5 offered a quiet but meaningful recognition of personal adaptation. Their narratives show that coping is not denial but reinterpretation, absence becomes a catalyst for self-reliance, and resilience. This was reflected in their responses:

"It did not feel like a complete loss; it simply shaped me to become more independent."—PAX 1

"I'm the only one who taught myself things."—PAX 2

"Maybe being independent."—PAX 5

These stories show signs of avoidant attachment, where people hold back their emotions and depend mostly on themselves. The participants focused on being strong and independent, shaped by growing up without a father. Instead of talking about pain or loss, they highlighted how they grew through being alone and learning to rely on themselves. This reflects avoidant attachment patterns, where individuals often avoid emotional closeness and emphasize self-reliance to protect themselves from vulnerability (Drescher, 2025).

Emotional Complexities

The essence of emotional complexities is lived as a paradox. Participants revealed that paternal absence wounds through detachment yet inspires through longing to become better. This

theme centers on how the absence of a father affects the perspective and motivation of the participants on studying psychology. The participants' responses suggest that the development of an avoidant attachment style is rooted in the absence of a father figure. This was stated by PAX 7, who reported growing up emotionally distant and experiencing personal difficulties associated with the lack of paternal presence. This was reflected in their responses, which indicated that:

> *"Since I grew up distant and with a lot of personal issues—because I felt I lacked the presence of a father."—PAX 7*

On the other hand, the lack of the paternal bond inspires the participants to become more present and active in their future family. PAX 3 stated that he would take care of his future family in a way that they will never experience what he went through. Pax 4 said that he would rather strive to be a better father himself instead of becoming like his father. However, PAX 6 stated that the loss of her father led her to a sense of hopelessness, as she felt she no longer had a reason to continue. However, recognizing that there are still people who support her, she has chosen to move forward and focus on her personal growth. This was manifested in their statement:

> *"I will support my family and the future family I'll build with my future partner in a way that they won't experience what I went through."—PAX 3*

> *"I thought, instead of becoming like my father... I'll just choose to be a better one."—PAX 4*

> *"But at the same time, I'm also losing hope, wondering why I'm still doing this. Maybe, now that I'm still alive, I feel like I keep on growing because there are many people around me."—PAX 6*

These narratives reflect insecure attachment, where individuals have a disruption of the foundational bond that results in emotional avoidance, anxiety, or self- reliance. The participant's response shows that their experiences from the loss of their father caused them to be independent, which also led to the development of avoidant attachment styles. But later on, develop motivation to improve themselves and become committed to being emotionally present and nurturing to their future family. This is supported by Kurata et al. (2024), who stated that disrupted attachment due to father absence can affect identity development by shaping emotional responses, self-concept, and relational expectations. In short, attachment experiences, especially those marked by absence, can play a critical role in how identity is formed and maintained.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the lived experiences of psychology students who grew up without paternal presence, guided by the central question: *"What is the essence of the lived experience of Psychology students without paternal presence?"* The findings revealed five interconnected themes: Strength, Relational Dynamics, Inner Disconnection, Adaptive Coping, and Emotional Complexities, which together capture the essence of how paternal absence shapes emotional development, attachment patterns, and identity formation.

The narratives show that paternal absence disrupts emotional security and relational communication, consistent with Attachment Theory, yet also highlight the emergence of resilience, independence, and adaptive coping. Importantly, the study extends Attachment Theory by demonstrating the coexistence of avoidant attachment tendencies and resilience, and by revealing how psychology education provides reflective capacities that reshape meaning-making. This

duality underscores that paternal absence does not solely result in emotional hardship; it can also foster growth, self-awareness, and motivation to build healthier relational patterns.

Practically, the findings emphasize the need for counseling support that addresses identity, emotional regulation, and relational trust; educational programs that integrate discussions of family diversity and attachment; and community initiatives that strengthen resilience through peer-support networks. At the policy level, promoting father involvement, family stability, and accessible mental health services remains.

LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH

This study is limited by its small and geographically restricted sample, consisting only of seven psychology students from Batangas who grew up under paternal absence. While this number is sufficient for phenomenological inquiry, the narrow scope restricts the generalizability of findings to other regions, socioeconomic contexts, or academic disciplines. Moreover, the study focused exclusively on participants who experienced complete paternal absence, without considering situations of partial or intermittent absence, such as fathers living away due to migration, divorce, or long-distance arrangements. Orphaned and bereaved children were also excluded, even though their experiences may differ significantly. Another limitation lies in the focus on participants' present reflections as emerging adults, which did not systematically explore their childhood memories or developmental trajectories. This restricts understanding of how paternal absence influences identity formation across different life stages. In addition, relational dynamics were examined primarily within the family, leaving unexplored how paternal absence shapes friendships, romantic partnerships, or broader social connections. The reliance on self-reported narratives further introduces potential bias, as accounts may be influenced by selective memory, emotional state, or personal interpretation. Finally, the perspectives of other family members, such as mothers, siblings, or even the absent fathers themselves, were not included, narrowing the relational analysis and leaving important voices unheard.

Future research should address these limitations by expanding sampling to include larger and more diverse populations across regions, socioeconomic backgrounds, and academic disciplines. Longitudinal designs that follow individuals from childhood into adulthood would provide deeper insights into how paternal absence shapes emotional regulation, attachment, and identity development over time. Comparative studies involving children with partial paternal presence, orphaned or bereaved individuals, and those with intermittent father involvement could highlight variations in coping strategies and resilience. It is also important to explore how paternal absence affects relationships beyond the family, such as friendships and romantic bonds, to provide a fuller picture of social development. Including perspectives from mothers, siblings, and absent fathers would enrich relational analysis and triangulate findings, offering a more holistic understanding of family dynamics. Finally, applied research should investigate how schools and institutions can design support programs that foster resilience, strengthen identity, and promote healthy relationships among students experiencing paternal absence.

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