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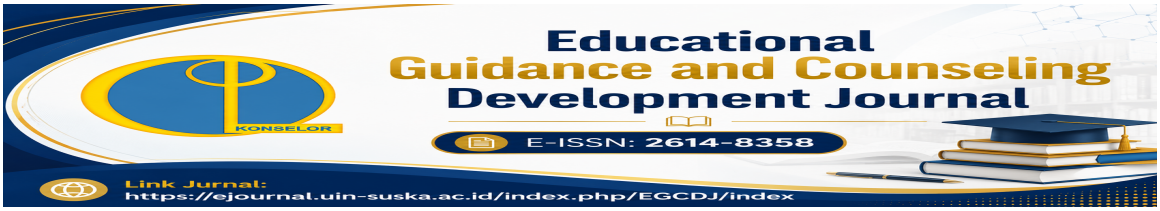

Identity Crisis and the Search for the Meaning of Life in Orphaned Children: Narrative Qualitative Study

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Abstract: Orphaned adolescents are often considered highly vulnerable to identity crises and difficulties in finding meaning in life due to the loss of parental figures. However, empirical findings in different contexts may reveal more complex psychological dynamics. This study aims to explore the dynamics of identity crisis and the search for meaning in life among orphaned adolescents using a qualitative narrative approach. This research employed a qualitative narrative approach with three orphaned adolescents in Jambi Province selected as research informants. Data were collected through a series of in-depth interviews and analyzed using narrative analysis approach. The findings indicate that, contrary to common theoretical assumptions, the participants did not experience a significant identity crisis. Instead, they demonstrated relatively stable self-understanding, emotional resilience, and the ability to maintain social roles. This finding may be influenced by contextual factors such as family support, cultural values, and religiosity, which function as protective factors. In terms of meaning in life, participants actively constructed meaning through personal goals, meaningful relationships, and a strong motivation to make their families proud. These findings suggest that the experience of parental loss does not necessarily lead to identity disturbance, but can also foster adaptive meaning-making and resilience. However, given the small sample size, the findings of this study are context-bound and cannot be generalized to all orphaned adolescents. This study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the psychosocial development of orphaned adolescents and provides implications for guidance and counseling practices that are more responsive to their contextual needs.

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INTRODUCTION

The family, consisting of parents and children, is the primary social environment where individuals first experience social interaction and development. However, the stability of this environment can be disrupted when individuals encounter traumatic life events during their developmental years. Traumatic life events, such as the loss of a parent, serve as powerful triggers that exacerbate identity crises in adolescents. Orphans face distinct psychological and social challenges due to the absence of parental guidance, emotional support, and stable family roles during a critical stage of development (Awalia et al., 2022). The optimal functioning of the family plays a crucial role in shaping strong human resources and healthy family systems (Herawati et al., 2020). Within the family, children receive not only physical protection but also emotional support, a sense of security, and the foundation of personal identity (Santrock, 2020). When a child loses one or both parents, their life conditions may change drastically, often bringing not only material difficulties but also significant psychological challenges (Vastya et al., 2021).

Among various forms of parental loss, the death of a mother can have a particularly profound impact on a child's emotional and psychological development. Mothers often serve as the primary caregivers who provide emotional warmth, guidance, and daily support. According to attachment theory, the bond between a child and their mother is fundamental to emotional security (Cassidy et al., 2013). Difficulties in navigating these stages can increase the risk of psychological distress.

During adolescence, the psychological impact of parental loss can become more complex because this developmental stage is closely associated with identity formation. According to Erikson's psychosocial development theory, adolescence represents the stage of identity versus role confusion, in which individuals attempt to establish a coherent sense of self, including their values, beliefs, and life goals (Côté, 2018). Adolescents who successfully navigate this stage develop a clear identity, whereas failure to do so may result in confusion about their roles and future direction. Previous studies suggest that adolescents who experience parental loss are more vulnerable to identity-related difficulties due to emotional insecurity and changes in their social environment (Vanderlei et al., 2023). Such changes may include shifts in caregiving arrangements, living situations, and social networks, which can further complicate identity development.

In addition to identity-related challenges, the loss of a parent can also influence how adolescents perceive the meaning and purpose of life. Early reactions to parental death may involve confusion, emotional distress, and negative perceptions about life (Boelen & Spuij, 2024). Some individuals may struggle to process their grief and develop maladaptive coping strategies, such as avoidance or denial, which can prolong emotional difficulties (Boelen & Spuij, 2024). However, the experience of suffering can also encourage individuals to search for deeper meaning in life. Frankl argues that the search for meaning is a fundamental human motivation, particularly when individuals face difficult life circumstances (Chanouha et al., 2026). Through experiences of love, responsibility, and personal struggle, individuals can discover meaning even in the midst of suffering. For adolescents who have lost their mothers, the search for meaning can become an important psychological process that helps them reinterpret their loss and develop a sense of purpose.

Several studies have highlighted this dynamic process. Research by Syah et al. (2024) found that adolescents who lost their mothers initially experienced strong emotional distress and rejection but gradually began to reinterpret their life experiences and pursue meaningful goals. Similarly, research by Zola et al. (2023) reported that students raised in single-parent families often demonstrate a heightened awareness of life meaning. These findings suggest

that although parental loss may create psychological vulnerability, it can also encourage adolescents to engage in a deeper search for meaning in life.

Despite the growing body of research on parental loss, most studies primarily focus on emotional distress and psychological maladjustment. Limited attention has been given to how orphaned adolescents construct their identity and meaning in life through their personal narratives, particularly within the Indonesian sociocultural context. Moreover, existing studies tend to emphasize vulnerability and assume that parental loss leads to identity crisis, without sufficiently exploring the possibility of resilience and adaptive identity development. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by examining how orphaned adolescents narratively interpret their experiences, construct identity, and develop meaning in life.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the dynamics of identity crisis and the search for meaning in life among orphaned adolescents using a narrative qualitative approach. By examining adolescents' personal stories and lived experiences, this research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how they interpret loss, construct their identity, and develop meaning in their lives. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of guidance and counseling interventions that are more responsive to the psychosocial needs of orphaned adolescents, particularly within the Indonesian context.

METHOD

This study explored two main concepts, namely identity crisis and the search for meaning in life among orphaned adolescents, using a qualitative narrative inquiry approach guided by the principles of narrative research proposed by Creswell (2014). Narrative inquiry focuses on understanding how individuals interpret and construct meaning from their life experiences, particularly through the structure of their personal stories, including temporality (past, present, and future), key life events, and meaning-making processes. This framework emphasizes the reconstruction of personal stories, temporality of experiences, and the social context in which experiences occur. Therefore, the narrative approach was considered appropriate for examining the lived experiences of adolescents who have lost their mothers and how they interpret this loss in relation to their identity development and life meaning.

The use of three participants is considered adequate within narrative inquiry, which prioritizes depth of individual experiences rather than large sample sizes. The aim of this study is not generalization, but an in-depth understanding of participants lived experiences. The inclusion criteria included: (1) having experienced the death of their mother, (2) being in late adolescence (18–20 years old), (3) having experienced the loss for at least one year to allow reflection on their experiences, and (4) being willing to share personal experiences related to the research topic. Participants were contacted through direct communication and WhatsApp. The selection of three participants is consistent with narrative research traditions, which emphasize depth of personal stories rather than large sample sizes (Creswell, 2014). To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms were used throughout the research report.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed in this study due to the sensitive nature of discussing parental loss. Prior to the interviews, participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Written or verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants before the data collection process began. All interview data were treated confidentially and used solely for research purposes.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to share their personal stories while enabling the researcher to maintain focus on the key

research topics. The interview guide included several main domains, such as (1) participants' experiences after the loss of their mother, (2) emotional responses and coping processes, (3) experiences related to identity development, and (4) reflections on the meaning and purpose of life. The use of open-ended questions enabled participants to narrate their experiences freely and in their own words.

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or through WhatsApp calls depending on participants' availability and accessibility. The use of these two modes of communication was intended to ensure flexibility while maintaining consistency in the interview process, as the same interview guide and procedures were applied in both formats. The interviews were conducted in February 2025 and lasted approximately 30–45 minutes for each participant. With the participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The data were analyzed using a narrative analysis approach, emphasizing how participants constructed and interpreted their life experiences. The analysis commenced with repeated readings of the interview transcripts to develop a comprehensive understanding of each participant's narrative. Instead of segmenting the data into discrete codes, the analysis prioritized the continuity of each narrative, including significant life events, emotional transitions, and processes of meaning-making. Each participant's narrative was subsequently reconstructed to identify turning points, patterns of adjustment, and the ways in which identity and life experiences were understood. Ultimately, the narratives were interpreted to elucidate the underlying psychological processes and the dynamic nature of identity and meaning-making across participants.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the data, this study applied several criteria, including credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was ensured through member checking, in which participants were asked to confirm the accuracy of the interpretations. Dependability was established by maintaining an audit trail documenting the research process, including data collection and analysis procedures. Confirmability was addressed by ensuring that the findings were grounded in participants' narratives and supported by reflexive notes to minimize researcher bias.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Informant A: Living Through Loss and Learning to Stand Again

Informant A, who is 18, experienced the loss of both parents. This left her feeling lost at a time when she needed support and guidance. She described this loss as more than sadness; it felt like her whole world fell apart:

> *"When I lost my mother, I was devastated. I felt like I lost everything. I felt like there was no one to direct me because my father had also passed away…"*

This experience marked a turning point in her life. At first, she struggled to understand what had happened. Her emotions changed often. Sometimes she could accept the loss, but at other times, the sadness came back strongly:

> *"At times, I can accept this incident, but at other times, I cannot… Now I can accept it, but there are times when I am very sad…"*

Even though she struggled emotionally, she did not stay stuck. Over time, she started to find direction again. For her, taking on responsibility helped her find meaning:

"Despite my mother's passing, I still have a responsibility to make my parents proud; I must excel in my studies."

Instead of giving up, she used her loss as motivation to move forward. Support from her family was also important in helping her feel stable again:

"My family motivates me despite the absence of my mother."

At first, A felt uncomfortable with how others saw her, especially in social settings. But as time passed, she learned to adapt and became more confident:

"At first I felt uncomfortable… but over time I became more confident…"

Although she had to become independent sooner than she expected, she still felt the need for guidance:

"Sometimes I am sad and tired of having to be independent early… I still really need guidance from others."

She often keeps her feelings to herself:

"When I'm sad, I usually hold it in… I usually just cry in my room."

Overall, A's story shows how she moved from emotional breakdown to rebuilding herself. Her sense of self did not fall apart after her loss. Instead, it slowly grew stronger through responsibility, reflection, and support from others.

Informant B: Accepting Loss and Moving Forward with Awareness

Informant B, who is 20 years old, shares a different story. Unlike A, she approaches loss in a calmer and more thoughtful way. From the beginning, she sees her experience as part of a bigger picture in life.

"What I can understand at that time is that life is temporary… grieving is natural, but it should not drag on in sadness."

Instead of feeling overwhelmed for a long time, B seems to accept her loss sooner. She recognizes the pain but does not let it define her. For her, finding meaning is about moving forward with purpose.

"I want to make my mother proud… I'm sure she will see me from there."

It seems her relationship with her mother continues in an emotional and symbolic way, even though her mother is no longer physically present.

Interestingly, informant B does not feel that her self-worth has been significantly affected:

"No, it's normal."

She does notice that losing her mother made her become independent sooner:

"At first I was sad because I had to be independent early, but over time I have made peace with it…"

Still, she sometimes feels emotional longing, especially when she sees others with their mothers:

"When I see other people close to their mothers… I feel pleased and envious…"

When dealing with her emotions, B seems aware and accepting of her feelings:

"I usually cry until I get worn out… sadness is a natural part of life…"

Her story shows that loss does not always cause instability. Instead, it can become part of someone's life in a way that feels steady, realistic, and hopeful for the future.

Informant C: Growing Up Without a Mother, Finding Meaning Through Others

Informant C is 19 years old, and her experience is quite different from the others. She lost her mother when she was very young and does not have direct memories of her.

"At first I didn't know because my mother died when I was 1 year old…"

For her, understanding the loss came gradually rather than suddenly. As a result, her emotional response is less intense but still there.

"I was sad, sure, but I can accept my mother's death because I have a grandmother who loves me."

Her grandmother plays an important role in her life, providing emotional support and helping her feel cared for.

Her relationships also shape her sense of purpose.

"I want to make my grandmother, grandfather, and father proud."

When it comes to her identity, C seems to have a stable sense of self.

"No, because I have never met my mother."

However, she is still not completely unaffected. She sometimes compares herself to others and feels emotionally sensitive. times it's sad to see people close to their mothers…"

Informant C is also more reserved when it comes to expressing her emotions.

"I'm the quiet type… I prefer to keep quiet… I have difficulty controlling my emotions…"

Her story shows that growing up without a mother does not always cause confusion about identity. Instead, she builds her sense of self through the relationships she still has.

Across Narratives

When we look at all three stories, a clear pattern appears. Losing a parent brings sadness, confusion, and emotional challenges, but it does not always cause a deep or long-lasting identity crisis. Each person finds their own way to adjust: Informant A rebuilds herself through responsibility, informant B moves forward through acceptance and awareness, and informant C develops meaning through substitute relationships.

One thing that stands out is that meaning is not something they have right away. Instead, they build it over time. Support systems, personal reflection, and life goals all help shape how they move forward. These stories show that loss is not just a source of vulnerability. It can also be a place where resilience, adaptation, and meaning-making develop.

Discussion

Self-identity is a fundamental aspect in the formation of one's personality, which includes an individual's understanding of who they are, their values, and the social roles they play in their daily lives. Studies show that having a positive self-identity is closely related to high self-confidence and strong mental resilience, which has a direct impact on one's level of life satisfaction (Noor et al., 2024; Yan et al., 2024). For orphans, self-identity becomes even more important as they experience the loss of parental figures, who often are the primary source of identity formation during development. Orphans who lack a clear self-identity often face social challenges that exacerbate their psychological difficulties. Li et al. (2022) explains that orphans often experience depression and sleep disorders, which are largely influenced by the lack of social support and incomplete self-identity. From a psychological perspective, orphaned adolescents tend to face problems such as lack of self-confidence, uncertainty about the future, and resignation to the circumstances they experience (Praekanata et al., 2023). Therefore, it is important for orphans to be able to form a strong self-identity to grow and develop healthily, both psychologically and socially. A supportive environment, involvement in social activities, as well as the presence of positive surrogate figures such as guardians or mentors, can greatly help the process of forming an orphan's self-identity. The current findings show that participants' identity development is closely connected to their lived experiences, relationships, and how they interpret loss.

In addition to self-identity, the meaning of life is also essential for orphans to have. The meaning of life is a goal to be achieved in life, accompanied by the belief and hope that there are important things that should be achieved and realized throughout the journey of life (Saujani et al., 2024). The meaning of life is not only present in pleasant situations but can also be found even in suffering, provided one is able to understand (Atsniyah & Supradewi, 2019). In this context, the loss of a mother, a crucial figure in a child's life, can be a painful experience for an orphan, triggering deep questions about the meaning of life, future goals, and self-existence. The lack of meaning in life can have a serious impact on individuals. Saragih and Siregar explain that orphans who are unable to find a purpose in life tend to experience an existential crisis, which can lead to a deep sense of hopelessness and reduce their involvement in various life opportunities (Saragih & Siregar, 2023). Conversely, orphans who are able to find meaning in life will be mentally healthier, have higher levels of life satisfaction, and have a predominance of positive emotions over negative feelings (Victoriana et al., 2023). In this study, these existential processes were not just abstract ideas. They appeared clearly in the participants' personal stories as they tried to understand their experiences.

This study shows that the orphaned students who became informants did not experience a significant identity crisis. This pattern appears throughout the participants' stories. For instance, one participant first struggled with emotional instability but later became more responsible and self-directed. Another showed early acceptance and emotional awareness. A third participant's identity development remained fairly stable, influenced by a lack of direct attachment and the support of substitute caregivers. Although the loss of a parent is a traumatic experience that can affect an individual's psychological development, the informants were still able to demonstrate positive self-understanding thanks to support from their surroundings, such as family and friends, as well as faith in God that gave them strength and fortitude in dealing with the situation. In interviews, informants said they were still confident in their identity and values instilled by their parents. They showed no signs of identity confusion or difficulty in determining the direction of life. In fact, some of them stated that the experience of loss actually strengthened their character and encouraged them to become more independent and responsible individuals. These factors are more than just theories. They show up clearly in the participants' lives, where family support, social ties, and spiritual beliefs often helped them keep a steady sense of who they are.

This finding supports some previous research; for example, the study conducted by (Pambudi & Darmawanti, 2022) stated that three of the four orphans in their study showed good self-acceptance, as they were able to describe their characters positively and adapt to situations thanks to positive environmental support from family and friends. In contrast to one other informant, who had difficulty seeing himself positively due to a restrictive environment and pressure to adapt, which became increasingly difficult as he lacked experience in adjusting to changing times. Also supported by research conducted (Stevanus et al., 2022) that the spiritual guidance applied during their stay at the orphanage plays an important role in encouraging adolescents' motivation to recognize and understand themselves better. This finding aligns with the interview results, indicating that the relationship with God significantly influences orphans' beliefs about their identity. In a study conducted by Hanafi & Nurkarim (2024), orphans with good character education will have confidence in their identity and can develop a positive one.

In addition to experiencing fairly good self-identity formation, this study also found that informants who are orphan students actively seek and build the meaning of their lives. In interviews, the informants expressed that losing a mother figure was extremely painful for them, and they initially believed that life had lost all meaning; however, over time, they were

able to accept and understand that losing their parents was not the end of everything but rather the beginning of their journey toward discovering a more meaningful life purpose. Some said loss motivated them to succeed and make their parents proud, even after they were gone. It took a long time to understand and accept that they went through difficult times and were down, but eventually they were able to turn their loss into strength to move forward in life. This transformation did not happen right away. Instead, it developed slowly through emotional struggle, reflection, and adjustment, as shown in the participants' stories.

This finding is reinforced by several previous studies; for example, research conducted by Pambudi & Darmawanti (2022) found that the orphans in their study could make sense of their lives positively with the process of self-acceptance and support from family. In addition, research by Steger et al. (2006) suggests that individuals who experience traumatic events tend to be more active in their search for meaning in life and that this search contributes positively to their psychological well-being. A study by Aliyah & Darmawanti (2022) also supports this finding by stating that behind the grief process experienced by their research informants, there are many meanings that can be taken from these painful events, such as being able to make their own decisions, not easily dissolving in sadness, and being stronger in facing problems, but to get to this stage, the informants go through a long search process. Also supported by research conducted by Nurriyana & Savira (2021)most of the participants realized that losing a parent is not merely a negative experience but also contains valuable lessons that can help them develop into a better person in the future. Reinforced by a study conducted by Vastya et al. (2021) that the event of grief due to the loss of parents did not reduce their informants' motivation to continue to excel, they interpreted the loss as a new spirit and still wanted to excel to make their parents proud.

Looking at the findings from a narrative angle, this study shows that the participants' experiences are not easily labeled as simply vulnerable or resilient. Instead, their stories are ongoing and personal. Each person found meaning and built their identity in their own way, influenced by loss, relationships, and self-reflection. For example, one participant grew from emotional instability to a stronger sense of responsibility. Another showed early acceptance and emotional awareness, while a third developed a stable sense of self through new family connections. These stories show that identity and meaning do not form right after a loss, but develop slowly over time. This supports the idea that adolescents are not just affected by trauma, but actively make sense of and reshape their experiences within their own social and cultural worlds. This study offers a more detailed view by showing that orphaned adolescents are not just vulnerable. They are also active agents who can find meaning, adapt to loss, and keep a strong sense of identity in their own life situations.

This study has several limitations. Firstly, due to the limited number of participants, the results of this study cannot be generalized to a wider population. Secondly, researchers cannot directly observe non-verbal expressions and emotional nuances when conducting remote interviews, such as over the phone. Thirdly, the different social, cultural, and environmental backgrounds of each informant may also affect the way they interpret their experiences, so caution is needed in drawing any overarching conclusions. To increase the validity and depth of the data obtained, similar research is needed in the future with a larger number of participants and face-to-face interviews.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the dynamics of identity crisis and the search for meaning in life among orphaned adolescents using a qualitative narrative approach. The findings indicate that the participants did not experience a significant identity crisis, but instead demonstrated

relatively stable identity development, emotional resilience, and the ability to maintain social roles. In addition, they actively constructed meaning in life through personal goals, meaningful relationships, and a strong motivation to make their families proud. These processes took time to develop. They grew through personal experiences, emotional adjustment, and ongoing reflection, as shown in the participants' stories.

These findings suggest that the experience of parental loss does not necessarily lead to identity disturbance, but may also foster adaptive meaning-making and resilience. Identity development after losing a parent is not the same for everyone. It changes over time and depends on each person's life path and relationships. However, the findings are context-bound and should be interpreted with caution due to the small number of participants and the specific sociocultural background of the study; therefore, they cannot be generalized to all orphaned adolescents.

Overall, the study highlights the importance of contextual factors, such as family support, cultural values, and religiosity, in shaping adolescents' identity development and meaning-making processes. These findings help us better understand orphaned adolescents, not just as vulnerable, but also as capable of resilience and positive growth. These findings provide important implications for guidance and counseling practices to better support orphaned adolescents in developing resilience and positive psychological adjustment.

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