

Loss and Dependency: The Story of the Cinderella Complex in Early Adult Women Who Grew Up Without a Father

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ABSTRACT

The absence of a father figure during childhood may influence women's psychological development in early adulthood, particularly in the emergence of the Cinderella complex. This study aims to describe the manifestation of the Cinderella complex among early adult women who grew up without a father's presence or role. The research addresses the problem of how fatherlessness contributes to emotional dependence and the need for protection in adult women. This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach using a case study method. The participants consisted of three early adult women aged 18–25 years who experienced fatherlessness due to divorce, death, or psychological abandonment. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation, and were analyzed using an interactive analysis model. The results indicate that women who grow up without a father tend to seek a substitute for their "first love," which is often represented by the father figure. This unmet need fosters a dependence on others, particularly men, for protection and emotional security. Participants with Cinderella complex tendencies demonstrated a strong need for physical and emotional closeness, along with difficulties in achieving independence. The findings suggest that the Cinderella complex does not develop solely in women accustomed to receiving assistance but may also emerge in women lacking a father figure, driven by the motivation to find a replacement for the absent protective role. This study highlights the importance of understanding fatherlessness as a contributing factor to the development of emotional dependence in early adult women.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The family is the first and primary system in an individual's life and plays a crucial role in shaping a child's personality, independence, and psychological condition into adulthood [1]. Each family member has complementary roles, including the father's, which has a significant influence on a child's emotional, social, and cognitive development [2]. For girls, the father figure is often perceived as the first love, providing a sense of security,

protection, and self-validation [3]. The presence and optimal involvement of a father form an essential foundation for the development of women's self-confidence and independence in adulthood [4].

However, social realities indicate that father absence (fatherlessness) in Indonesia is increasing. Father absence may result from various factors, such as divorce, death, or child neglect [5]. Data show that Indonesia ranked third globally for the highest rate of fatherless children in 2021, with approximately 30% of children living without an active paternal role [6]. This condition has the potential to cause various psychological problems, particularly for girls, with effects that may persist into adulthood.

Psychological dependence in early adult women may manifest as fear of independence, doubts about personal abilities, and a strong desire to be protected and loved [7]. This phenomenon is known as the Cinderella complex or Cinderella syndrome, a concept introduced by Colette Dowling [8]. The Cinderella complex describes an unconscious psychological dependence in women, leading them to avoid responsibility and rely on others to feel safe and valued [9].

Participant AP also expressed several statements illustrating her emotional need for a male figure in her life. She stated that during her college years, she became aware of a need for a man who could provide affection and attention. In her relationship with her second former partner, she felt that this need for affection was temporarily fulfilled. However, when the attention and affection were no longer provided, she experienced emotional emptiness and a sense of loss. The loss of this figure made her feel deprived of the attention, time, and care she had previously received. This phenomenon indicates that emotional dependence, at varying levels, can be experienced by nearly all women. Such dependence may manifest as male dominance in women's decision-making and a habitual need to be loved and cared for. These conditions can trigger the emergence of the Cinderella complex. If this pattern occurs repeatedly, emotional dependence will become increasingly entrenched, and when the source of dependence disappears, women may experience profound feelings of loss.

Participant AP also revealed her family background, noting the absence of a father figure since she was 2.5 years old. She stated that the lack of a father caused her to grow up with low self-confidence, frequently compare herself to others, feel inadequate, and experience inferiority toward her social environment. In addition to father absence, a family parenting style with minimal appreciation also contributed to her low self-belief. A different phenomenon is experienced by women who grow up without a father's role from early childhood. They are often required to be independent in various situations; however, this condition may paradoxically give rise to symptoms of the Cinderella complex. Infancy to early childhood (0–5 years) and childhood to adolescence (7–15 years) are critical phases that require a significant paternal role. During these phases, children are in the golden age, when brain and physical development occur optimally [10]. The absence of a father figure during this period can affect children's cognitive, emotional, and social aspects, such as poor self-regulation, low self-esteem, feelings of loneliness, withdrawal, and depression [11].

The participant also stated that although her father was physically present, he did not fulfill his role and responsibilities as a father figure. She did not receive guidance from an early age and was closer to her mother. This condition led her to seek a father role in romantic

relationships, such as expecting affection, hugs, and attention from a partner, and needing a father to have fulfilled those needs. Many women who are required to be independent from a young age actually grow into individuals who strongly need protection, affection, and attention. They tend to feel powerless and dependent on others, particularly men. This psychological dependence may be demonstrated by difficulties making independent decisions, a need for assistance with every activity, a desire always to be noticed and appreciated, fear of traveling alone, a lack of self-confidence, and persistent feelings of inferiority. Participant AP reported that the absence of a partner made her feel she had lost an important role she had been seeking, leading to a strong sense of emptiness. She also admitted that she often asked her partner's opinion on various matters, even for simple decisions such as choosing daily meals. For women in fatherless conditions, the need for a male figure often becomes greater because the man is viewed as a substitute for the father's role. The presence of a man in their lives is believed to provide security, protection, motivation, advice, and guidance, all of which are greatly needed to face various life situations.

Previous studies indicate that tendencies toward the Cinderella complex can be found across different age ranges at varying levels. Female university students exhibited moderate levels of tendencies toward the Cinderella complex [12], while Auliasari [13] found such tendencies among adolescent girls from broken homes. These conditions were characterized by high dependence, difficulty making decisions, and a need for a father-substitute figure in romantic relationships. Furthermore, Zahrawaany and Fasikhah [14] demonstrated a negative relationship between personal maturity and tendencies toward the Cinderella complex in early adult women. Low personal maturity limits individuals' ability to be independent and explore their potential, thereby creating a need always to be protected and rescued by others. Fatherless conditions from childhood, especially during the golden age phases (0–5 years and 7–15 years), also have the potential to cause long-term psychological impacts such as low self-esteem, insecurity, loneliness, and emotional dependence [10], [11].

Various studies reveal that individuals who grow up without a strong relationship with their fathers tend to experience difficulties in identity formation, social skill development, and face a higher risk of behavioral problems and mental disorders [15]. Within a patriarchal cultural context, women are often positioned as weak, gentle, and in need of protection, which further reinforces psychological dependence on others, particularly men [16], [17].

Based on empirical findings and previous research, it can be concluded that the Cinderella complex is a complex phenomenon influenced by various factors, including the absence of a father figure. Although several studies have examined the Cinderella complex, research in Indonesia remains limited in its exploration of the experiences, causal factors, and impacts of the Cinderella complex among early adult women who grow up without a father. Therefore, this study aims to understand and describe in depth the meaning of the Cinderella complex experience, as well as to explore its factors, causes, and impacts on early adult women experiencing fatherlessness. This study is expected to provide theoretical and practical contributions to understanding the psychological dynamics of early adult women within the context of family and culture in Indonesia.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the Cinderella complex among early adult women who grew up without a father figure. The qualitative approach was chosen because the study is grounded in assumptions and interpretive frameworks that seek to explore the meaning of individuals' subjective experiences of the social and psychological phenomena they encounter. Qualitative research allows researchers to explore participants' experiences holistically within the context of their lived realities [13]. In addition, this approach positions the researcher as the primary instrument, actively involved in understanding the phenomenon's context, situations, and dynamics in a natural setting [18].

Participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria, namely, women aged 18–25 years who experienced fatherless conditions, whether due to parental divorce, the death of the father, or the absence of a paternal role from childhood through adolescence. In addition, participants demonstrated psychological dependence consistent with the characteristics of the Cinderella complex. All participants were provided with and signed informed consent, indicating their agreement and willingness to participate in the study. This study involved two main participants, identified by the initials AP and SN, and two significant others for each participant. The involvement of significant others aimed to enhance data credibility by confirming and reinforcing information obtained from the main participants.

Data were collected using in-depth interviews and observation. These methods were chosen because they are consistent with the open and flexible nature of qualitative research and enable the researcher to explore participants' experiences, emotions, and subjective meanings in greater depth [13]. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner to guide, while still allowing participants the freedom to express their experiences openly. Observations were conducted to complement the interview data, particularly regarding participants' behaviors, emotional expressions, and social interactions relevant to the phenomenon under study.

The data analysis technique used in this study was the interactive analysis model. Data analysis was conducted continuously from the data collection process through to the final stage of the study. The stages of analysis included data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During the data reduction stage, the researcher selected and summarized interview and observation data by carefully and in detail recording them, focusing on information relevant to the research objectives. The reduced data were then presented in descriptive narratives to facilitate understanding of the context and emerging patterns. The final stage involved drawing conclusions and verification, namely the in-depth interpretation of data meanings that were continuously verified throughout the research process [19].

Data trustworthiness in this study was ensured through triangulation and member checking. Triangulation was conducted in two forms: source triangulation and method triangulation. Source triangulation involved comparing data from the main participants with information from significant others with close relationships to them. Method triangulation involved comparing interview findings with observational data [20]. In addition, member

checking was conducted by reconfirming the researcher's findings and interpretations with the participants. If participants agreed with the interpretations, the data were considered credible and accountable. If discrepancies were identified, the researcher revisited discussions with the participants and adjusted the findings based on mutually agreed-upon information.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Result

This study aims to describe experiences of loss and dependence among early adult women in the context of the Cinderella complex in individuals who grew up without a father figure (fatherless). The research findings were obtained from two main participants, AP and SN, both aged 21, who experienced fatherlessness since childhood but with different backgrounds and experiential dynamics. The findings are presented as units of analysis that capture the main characteristics of the Cinderella complex.

The first participant, AP, experienced fatherlessness due to the absence of a paternal role despite physically living in the same household. The lack of attention, communication, and affection, as well as the presence of physical violence from childhood into adulthood, shaped a profound experience of loss of a father figure. This condition resulted in strong emotional dependence on a partner, low self-confidence, difficulty making independent decisions, and the emergence of psychosomatic symptoms.

The second participant, SN, experienced fatherlessness from childhood, which was exacerbated by her parents' divorce during adolescence. In addition to losing the father's role, SN also lost the mother's role and experienced physical and verbal violence. These experiences shaped trauma, fear of male figures, and a tendency to become functionally independent, while still harboring unmet needs for affection and physical closeness with others.

Unit of Analysis 1: Feeling Worthless

Table 1. Unit of Analysis – Feeling Worthless

Participant 1 (AP)	Participant 2 (SN)
Not receiving attention from a partner	Not being involved in certain situations by close others
Not receiving appreciation from the people around	Inability to express oneself
Not receiving a father's role	
Being abandoned by a partner	

Based on Table 1, feelings of worthlessness emerged in both participants, triggered by different factors. For AP, these feelings were highly dependent on the presence and attention of a partner; when affective needs were unmet, AP felt a loss of self-worth. In contrast, for SN, feelings of worthlessness were more strongly associated with a lack of emotional involvement in close relationships and limitations in self-expression, rooted in unsupportive caregiving and family relationships.

Unit of Analysis 2: Fear of Facing Challenges and Failure, and Avoidance of Risk

Table 2. Unit of Analysis – Fear of Facing Challenges and Failure, and Avoidance of Risk

Participant 1 (AP)	Participant 2 (SN)
Fear of being required to take on a leadership role	Strict parenting style
Fear of leaving the comfort zone	
Low self-esteem	

Table 2 shows that fear of facing challenges and failure was more dominant in AP, as indicated by fear of leadership, low self-confidence, and a tendency to avoid risks. In SN, this fear was more strongly influenced by strict parenting during childhood, which shaped a tendency to be cautious and to avoid situations perceived as potentially leading to failure.

Unit of Analysis 3: Difficulty Doing Everything Independently (Dependence)

Table 3. Unit of Analysis – Difficulty Doing Everything Independently (Dependence)

Participant 1 (AP)	Participant 2 (SN)
Difficulty making decisions	Need for validation of decisions made.
Seeking others' opinions, especially a partner	
Choosing clothes	
Choosing food	
Going to new places	
Need for femininity and protection	
Affective needs that must be fulfilled by others, especially a partner	
Low self-esteem	

Based on Table 3, dependence was most dominant in AP. AP showed difficulty carrying out daily activities without assistance or validation from others, particularly a partner. This dependence encompassed emotional aspects, decision-making, and even simple activities. Conversely, SN tended to be more behaviorally independent, although she still required emotional validation in certain conditions.

Unit of Analysis 4: Experiencing Psychosomatic Symptoms

Table 4. Unit of Analysis – Frequent Psychosomatic Symptoms

Participant 1 (AP)	Participant 2 (SN)
Experiencing gastric acid problems	Experiencing gastric acid problems
	Fear accompanied by bodily trembling

Table 4 indicates that both participants experienced psychosomatic symptoms as a result of psychological pressure. AP experienced gastric acid disturbances triggered by stress and overthinking when affective needs from her partner were unmet. Meanwhile, SN experienced physical symptoms such as gastric acid problems and bodily reactions such as trembling due to fear, which were associated with past trauma related to violence and exposure to raised voices. Overall, the findings indicate that the loss of a father figure from an early age contributes to the emergence of Cinderella complex characteristics with varying intensity and forms across individuals. AP exhibited a strong tendency toward emotional dependence on a partner, whereas SN tended to develop behavioral independence as a coping mechanism, while still retaining unmet needs for affection and closeness. These findings underscore that fatherlessness can give rise to complex dynamics of loss and dependence among early adult women.

3.2 Discussion

Based on the research findings, the tendency toward needs for protection, assistance, and affection among early adult women is influenced by factors such as parenting style, personal maturity, and self-concept. These findings are consistent with Dowling's theory [21], which states that such factors contribute to the emergence of the Cinderella complex, as also emphasized in the study [22]. Both subjects in this study demonstrated characteristics reflecting these factors, albeit with different dynamics.

In terms of parenting style, subject AP was raised in an environment that tended to be overprotective, characterized by restrictions on traveling independently, which fostered emotional dependence and a need for accompaniment. This condition led her to believe she was incapable of handling situations independently. Meanwhile, subject SN exhibited a parenting style characterized by a lack of parental trust, leading to low self-confidence and a tendency to seek validation from others. Although these parenting patterns differed, both contributed to the development of psychological dependence, a key characteristic of the Cinderella complex.

From the perspective of personal maturity, although both subjects had reached the age of 21, typically associated with increased independence, the field findings indicate that social environments and life experiences significantly influence the development of this maturity. AP and SN encountered obstacles in developing optimal independence, though these manifested differently. This suggests that personal maturity is not determined solely by age but also by the quality of life experiences and environmental support.

Regarding self-concept, both subjects exhibited relatively low self-concepts. AP and SN evaluated themselves negatively and perceived themselves as lacking worth, influenced by their surrounding environments. This weak self-perception reinforced the belief that they required protection from others, thereby intensifying tendencies toward the Cinderella complex. These findings are consistent with the view that a negative self-concept can strengthen emotional dependence and feelings of helplessness.

Another noteworthy finding of this study is the fatherless condition experienced by both subjects. However, the results indicate that fatherlessness does not automatically cause early adult women to develop the Cinderella complex. In some individuals, this condition may instead reinforce such tendencies when accompanied by a strong need for protection from a male figure. This aligns with previous studies stating that the Cinderella complex tends to emerge in women who are accustomed to dependence, frequently receive assistance, and are perceived as helpless [23], [24].

Referring to Dowling's theory [21], the Cinderella complex is characterized by a need for help, particularly from men. The research findings revealed varied responses between the two subjects. Subject AP exhibited tendencies consistent with this theory, namely, high dependence on others, especially a male partner, and a strong need for protection and assistance. In contrast, subject SN displayed a different pattern. Despite experiencing fatherlessness, SN demonstrated a higher level of independence and did not rely on men to meet daily needs. SN acknowledged that her needs were more oriented toward emotional validation, reassurance from others, and physical closeness rather than instrumental assistance.

These differing findings also indicate a discrepancy with previous research suggesting that early adult women with fatherless backgrounds inevitably exhibit tendencies toward the Cinderella complex [25]. Instead, this study emphasizes that fatherlessness is not deterministic but is influenced by other factors such as personal independence, self-concept, and relational experiences. Thus, the Cinderella complex in early adult women is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be explained by a single factor alone.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the discussion and analysis presented, it can be concluded that the fatherless condition experienced by early adult women does not, in itself, directly or inevitably lead to the emergence of Cinderella complex tendencies. Such tendencies are more strongly influenced by a combination of several factors, namely parenting style, the level of personal maturity, and individual self-concept. These three factors play a crucial role in shaping excessive needs for protection, attention, and affection.

The Cinderella complex may develop as a response to social environmental influences that perceive women as weak and helpless. The more strongly these views are accepted and internalized by individuals, the greater their need to be protected, assisted, and to receive affection from others. In this context, the social environment plays a significant role in either reinforcing or mitigating tendencies toward the Cinderella complex among early adult women.

The findings of this study also reveal more complex dynamics among early adult women with fatherless backgrounds. For some participants, the experience of fatherlessness may exacerbate Cinderella complex tendencies due to unmet affective needs, leading individuals to seek fulfillment of these needs from others, particularly male figures. However, this study also found that not all early adult women with fatherless backgrounds exhibit Cinderella complex tendencies, especially those who possess higher levels of independence and a more positive self-concept. Thus, fatherlessness is not a single determining factor but rather one of several interacting factors alongside psychological and environmental aspects that shape Cinderella complex tendencies.

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