

Research Article

Interpersonal Communication Between Mothers and Children in Reducing Fatherlessness in Bahagia Subdistrict, Bekasi City

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Abstract: This study explores the dynamics of interpersonal communication between mothers and their children in mitigating the effects of fatherlessness in Bahagia Subdistrict, Bekasi City, Indonesia. Fatherlessness—defined as the absence of a father figure in a child’s emotional and developmental life—has become an increasingly significant social phenomenon, with Indonesia ranking among the highest in the world for fatherless households. The study aims to understand how single mothers manage emotional communication and perform dual parental roles to sustain their children’s psychological well-being. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews and participant observation involving three single mothers and four children living in Bahagia Subdistrict. The findings reveal that effective interpersonal communication—grounded in openness, empathy, supportiveness, positiveness, and equality—strengthens emotional bonds, builds trust, and fosters resilience in children growing up without fathers. Moreover, such communication becomes a key coping mechanism that enables mothers to reduce the negative psychological and social consequences of fatherlessness, such as low self-esteem, social withdrawal, and academic decline. The study contributes to the field of family communication by illustrating the adaptive strategies of single mothers in Indonesia as they balance affection, discipline, and economic responsibilities. The results highlight how communication can function not only as an emotional bridge but also as a practical tool for building stability and maintaining harmony in single-parent households.

Keywords: Interpersonal Communication; Fatherlessness; Single Mothers; Child Development; Bekasi City.

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1. Introduction

Communication serves as a fundamental mechanism through which humans connect, express emotions, and construct meaning in everyday interactions. According to Irawan (2017), nearly seventy percent of human activity involves communication, signifying its central role in shaping social relationships and emotional understanding. Beyond the exchange of messages, communication—particularly interpersonal communication—acts as a foundation for empathy, trust, and cooperation in both private and social contexts.

Interpersonal communication, as defined by Maharani (2020), is the process of sharing information, feelings, and meaning between two or more individuals through verbal and nonverbal channels. It involves mutual influence and emotional engagement, enabling people to understand and respond to one another’s perspectives. DeVito (2019) further characterizes it as a dynamic, reciprocal process that shapes individuals’ behaviors and emotions through ongoing interaction. When grounded in openness, empathy, supportiveness, positivity, and equality, interpersonal communication becomes a vehicle for fostering intimacy and emotional stability within relationships.

Within family structures, communication is the cornerstone of harmony and psychological security. As Rusmawati (2020) observes, face-to-face communication between parents and children enables emotional attunement and helps maintain family cohesion. However, when family integrity is disrupted—especially by separation or divorce—the absence of one parental figure can profoundly affect the emotional well-being of both mother and child. This situation is increasingly visible in Indonesia through the phenomenon of fatherlessness, in which children grow up without the active involvement of their fathers.

Fatherlessness has become a pervasive issue in Indonesian society. According to the Ministry of Social Affairs, Indonesia ranks third globally in the prevalence of fatherless households (Nurmalasari et al., 2024). Yet, despite this alarming reality, public discourse rarely addresses the long-term consequences of growing up without a father. Many Indonesians still conflate fatherlessness with terms like single parenthood or broken home, overlooking its specific emotional and developmental implications (Arsyia, 2023).

Scholars have long documented the adverse effects of father absence. Amato, as cited in McLanahan and Percheski (2008), explains that children who grow up without fathers often experience anxiety, reduced self-confidence, and difficulty building social relationships. Similarly, Lamb (2004) found that consistent paternal involvement contributes significantly to children's emotional stability and social competence. In contrast, the absence of a father can leave children emotionally vulnerable and psychologically insecure. These findings underscore the irreplaceable emotional value of fatherly affection in a child's formative years.

For single mothers, the absence of paternal support creates dual challenges: they must provide both emotional nurturing and economic stability while maintaining strong relational bonds with their children. Suryani and Adri (2024) note that the double burden carried by single mothers—especially those who work outside the home—can lead to fatigue and stress, potentially affecting their communication patterns with their children. Nonetheless, many single mothers display remarkable resilience, adopting adaptive communication strategies to sustain emotional warmth and minimize the effects of fatherlessness.

In Bahagia Subdistrict, Bekasi City, where this study is situated, these realities manifest in subtle yet profound ways. Observations indicate that children aged between 8 and 16 years who have experienced parental separation often display emotional withdrawal, diminished social interaction, and decreased academic motivation. For example, a child who was once cheerful and active began to isolate himself after his parents' divorce, avoiding outdoor play and peer activities. Mothers in similar circumstances reported feeling both emotionally strained and deeply concerned about their children's changing behaviors.

Within this context, interpersonal communication becomes more than just an exchange of words—it serves as a restorative practice that reconnects mothers and children through empathy, understanding, and emotional presence. Through daily dialogue, reassurance, and open emotional expression, mothers attempt to recreate a sense of familial warmth that compensates for the missing paternal presence. Guided by DeVito's (2019) framework of interpersonal communication and supported by Social Role Theory (Anglin, Kincaid, Short, & Allen, 2022), this study examines how single mothers manage to integrate affection, discipline, and emotional guidance into everyday communication with their children.

The case of mothers such as Ibu Sri Uryati, Ibu Rivaliana, and Ibu Farisa—each navigating life as single parents in Bahagia Subdistrict—illustrates the lived realities of this phenomenon. Their experiences show how communication acts as a bridge across emotional gaps, allowing children such as Yuli, Fatar, Fadlan, and Afif to rebuild trust and security in their relationships with their mothers. These micro-level interactions reflect a broader social narrative about the resilience of women and the transformative power of communication in sustaining family integrity amid structural change.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how interpersonal communication functions as both an emotional and sociocultural tool for healing within single-parent families. It emphasizes that in the face of fatherlessness, maternal communication becomes the heart of resilience—restoring confidence, fostering belonging, and ensuring that even in the absence of a father, love and connection continue to define the family experience.

2. Preliminaries or Related Work or Literature Review

Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal communication lies at the heart of human relationships and emotional development. It is more than just the exchange of information—it involves the process of building meaning, empathy, and trust between individuals. Amalia and Natsir (2017) describe interpersonal communication as a form of direct human interaction that involves two or more people exchanging verbal and nonverbal messages in a reciprocal manner. In essence, communication in close relationships—such as between mothers and children—serves as a primary means of emotional expression and social learning.

DeVito (2019) identifies five essential qualities that determine the effectiveness of interpersonal communication: openness, empathy, supportiveness, positiveness, and equality. a). Openness reflects the willingness to express thoughts and feelings transparently while remaining receptive to others' perspectives; b). Empathy is the ability to emotionally understand and share another person's experiences; c). Supportiveness involves providing reassurance, encouragement, and emotional validation; d). Positiveness promotes optimism and constructive feedback during interactions; e). Equality emphasizes respect and mutual recognition between communicators.

These dimensions collectively create a dynamic of mutual understanding that strengthens the emotional bond between individuals. As Skuse (2020) notes, communication is not merely a cognitive process but also a relational one—anchored in emotional exchange, mutual respect, and responsiveness. Within family systems, interpersonal communication becomes a crucial foundation for fostering affection, guiding behavior, and reinforcing children's sense of security.

The Role of Mothers

The role of the mother extends far beyond biological care; it encompasses emotional nurturing, guidance, and the moral development of the child. Bowlby's (1988) Attachment Theory underscores that early emotional bonds between a child and their primary caregiver—typically the mother—form the basis for psychological security and social competence. When this attachment is strong and consistent, children develop confidence and are more likely to exhibit emotional stability.

Hurlock (1980) conceptualizes mothers as primary role models who influence a child's character and moral development through daily interaction. Children observe and internalize their mothers' behaviors, speech patterns, and emotional expressions, which shape their worldview. In single-parent households, this modeling becomes even more significant, as the mother assumes the dual role of nurturer and disciplinarian. Sarwono (2019) found that high-quality parental involvement and communication significantly reduce the risk of delinquent behavior among adolescents. Thus, maternal communication functions as both an emotional foundation and a behavioral guide.

The mother's role also intersects with cultural expectations. In Indonesian society, motherhood is deeply tied to the ideals of patience (*sabar*), empathy (*empati*), and sacrifice (*pengorbanan*). For single mothers, these expectations often intensify as they strive to maintain stability amid economic and emotional hardship. Nevertheless, through consistent interpersonal communication—marked by warmth, listening, and understanding—mothers can strengthen their children's sense of belonging and mitigate the emotional effects of fatherlessness.

Child Development

Child development encompasses physical, cognitive, emotional, and social growth that unfolds through interaction with the surrounding environment. According to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, the family is the most immediate and influential environment in shaping a child's developmental trajectory. Communication within the family plays a critical role in this process, serving as both a medium of instruction and a channel for emotional regulation.

Tehrani and Tehran (2015) argue that children interpret their experiences and construct meaning through daily communication with parents and peers. When parents engage in supportive, consistent, and empathetic communication, children develop stronger self-esteem and emotional intelligence. Conversely, in homes where communication is limited, inconsistent, or conflict-laden, children often experience insecurity and emotional withdrawal.

In the context of fatherlessness, the absence of paternal involvement creates unique developmental challenges. Studies by Amato (2000) and Lamb (2004) indicate that children raised without fathers are at higher risk of anxiety, depression, and reduced academic motivation. However, these effects can be mitigated when mothers employ nurturing and responsive communication practices. Through dialogue, affection, and validation, mothers help their children internalize positive coping mechanisms and develop resilience against emotional distress.

Fatherlessness

Fatherlessness refers to the condition in which a child grows up without the presence, guidance, or participation of a father figure. This phenomenon may result from various circumstances, including divorce, death, or abandonment. Mayangsari and Umroh (2020) highlight that the increasing rate of father absence in Indonesia reflects both economic migration and the normalization of divorce within urban families. The consequences, however, extend beyond economic deprivation—they permeate emotional, psychological, and social dimensions.

Amato and Keith (1991) assert that children raised without fathers tend to display higher levels of behavioral problems, such as aggression and social withdrawal. Similarly, Doherty (1998) found that fathers play a vital role in fostering discipline, self-confidence, and gender identity in their children. Without this presence, many children struggle with role modeling and self-regulation. Kimani and Kombo (2010) further observed that boys growing up without fathers often experience confusion about masculine identity and social responsibility, while girls may face difficulties in forming trust-based relationships with male figures.

Despite these challenges, not all fatherless families face negative outcomes. Research by Amato (2010) and McLanahan (2015) suggests that strong maternal communication can compensate for some aspects of paternal absence. When mothers maintain openness, empathy, and emotional responsiveness, children are more likely to adapt positively to single-parent family structures. In this light, communication becomes a powerful tool for emotional resilience.

In Indonesia, discussions around fatherlessness remain limited due to cultural sensitivities and stigma surrounding divorce. As noted by Rachman (2022), the term “fatherless” itself is relatively unfamiliar to most Indonesians, who tend to associate it with moral failure rather than structural or emotional realities. This lack of public discourse contributes to the invisibility of the issue, making studies like this one essential in providing empirical insights into how communication functions as an intervention mechanism within single-parent families.

Social Role Theory

Social Role Theory provides a conceptual framework for understanding how individuals adapt their behaviors according to societal expectations tied to their social positions. Biddle (1986) defines a social role as a set of norms, behaviors, and obligations associated with a particular status or identity. Within the family, these roles are traditionally distributed along gender lines: fathers as providers and protectors, mothers as nurturers and caregivers.

However, when these structures shift—such as through separation or divorce—individuals are often required to assume multiple or overlapping roles. Anglin, Kincaid, Short, and Allen (2022) explain that role strain occurs when one person is expected to fulfill responsibilities that typically belong to different social identities. For single mothers, this means embodying both maternal and paternal roles simultaneously. Duxbury, Lyons, and Higgins (2021) found that such dual-role adaptation often leads to emotional exhaustion but can also foster growth and resilience through redefined family interactions.

In the context of this study, Social Role Theory helps explain how mothers like Ibu Sri Uryati, Ibu Rivaliana, and Ibu Farisa navigate their multiple responsibilities. Despite limited resources, they engage in communication that reflects not only nurturing behavior but also authority, guidance, and moral leadership—traits typically associated with fathers. Their ability to balance affection with structure demonstrates adaptive role negotiation and highlights the importance of interpersonal communication as a tool of empowerment.

Communication Barriers

Even within strong family relationships, communication is not always seamless. DeVito (2019) defines communication barriers as any obstacle that distorts or prevents the accurate transmission of messages. These barriers may be physical, psychological, semantic, or cultural. Tubbs and Moss (2008) categorize them as follows:

Physical barriers — environmental distractions such as distance or noise.

Psychological barriers — emotions, stress, or personal biases that hinder understanding.

Semantic barriers — misinterpretation of language or message meaning.

Cultural barriers — differences in values or social norms that influence interpretation.

In single-parent families, psychological barriers are particularly prominent. Mothers and children may avoid sensitive discussions about the father's absence to prevent emotional pain or conflict. Over time, this avoidance can lead to emotional distance and misunderstanding. Effendy (2018) emphasizes that self-awareness and emotional regulation are essential for overcoming these challenges. By fostering an atmosphere of openness and empathy, mothers can rebuild mutual trust and create safe spaces for their children to express vulnerability.

Ultimately, communication barriers are not merely technical problems—they are emotional realities that must be addressed through conscious relational effort. Recognizing and overcoming these barriers allows mothers and children to transform silence into dialogue and grief into growth, reaffirming communication as the lifeline of family resilience.

3. Proposed Method

Research Approach

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore how interpersonal communication between mothers and their children contributes to reducing the effects of fatherlessness in Bahagia Subdistrict, Bekasi City. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to examine communication patterns in their natural context, providing rich, detailed, and interpretive insights into participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2018). The descriptive design enabled the researcher to present in-depth explanations of communication processes, meanings, and emotional expressions that occur between single mothers and their children in everyday interactions.

This method was particularly relevant because the study sought to understand how communication functions as both an emotional and adaptive mechanism rather than to measure or predict specific outcomes. As Bungin (2015) notes, qualitative research aims to uncover meaning behind human behavior, making it ideal for exploring social phenomena involving emotions, relationships, and identity—such as family communication in fatherless households.

Research Design

The study design followed a case study model, focusing on three single mothers and four children living in Bahagia Subdistrict, Bekasi City. Yin (2018) describes a case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, particularly when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.

This design allowed the researcher to observe communication as it naturally occurs within families, while also interpreting the social and emotional meanings that arise from these interactions. The research process involved three main stages: (1) observation, (2) in-depth interviews, and (3) data triangulation through documentation and field notes.

Participants and Sampling

The subjects of this study were single mothers and their children who live in Bahagia Subdistrict, Bekasi City. The participants included:

- 1) Ibu Sri Uryati and her daughter Yuli,
- 2) Ibu Rivaliana and her son Fatar,
- 3) Ibu Farisa and her two children, Fadlan and Afif.

All participants met the following criteria:

- 1) The mothers are raising their children independently without the presence or financial support of the father.
- 2) The children are aware of their father's absence and are in the developmental stage (ages 8–16).
- 3) Both mothers and children are willing to engage in open discussion about their family communication patterns.

The object of the study was the process of interpersonal communication between mothers and children, particularly focusing on (a) the characteristics of their communication, (b) communication barriers that emerge, and (c) strategies used to overcome these barriers.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using three primary techniques: observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation.

Observation — The researcher conducted direct observations in participants' homes to understand the natural flow of communication between mothers and children. This helped identify nonverbal cues such as tone of voice, facial expressions, and gestures. Field notes were taken to capture spontaneous interactions that revealed emotional patterns or responses (Spradley, 2016).

In-depth Interviews — Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant to gain deeper insights into their communication experiences, challenges, and emotional coping mechanisms. The questions were flexible, allowing participants to elaborate on their feelings and experiences in their own words. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed for thematic analysis.

Documentation — Supporting materials such as family photos, daily communication routines, and researcher field journals were used to supplement the primary data. These documents provided contextual understanding and validated observations made during the interviews.

This combination of methods provided a comprehensive view of communication practices, allowing the researcher to analyze both verbal and nonverbal dimensions of mother–child interaction.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study followed the Miles and Huberman (2014) interactive model, consisting of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

Data Reduction — Raw interview transcripts and observation notes were reviewed to identify significant statements related to communication behavior, emotional responses, and adaptive strategies.

Data Display — The information was organized into thematic categories such as “emotional openness,” “communication barriers,” and “maternal coping.” Visual displays such as tables and coding matrices helped clarify relationships among themes.

Conclusion Drawing and Verification — Themes were interpreted based on theoretical frameworks from DeVito's (2019) interpersonal communication model and Biddle's (1986) Social Role Theory. The conclusions were validated through cross-checking with participants and triangulation among data sources.

Through this process, the researcher identified recurring patterns of communication that reflected both emotional connection and adaptation to father absence.

Data Analysis

To ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings, this study used triangulation—a strategy that combines multiple data sources, methods, and perspectives (Denzin, 2017). Triangulation was achieved through:

Source triangulation: comparing interview data between mothers and children.

Method triangulation: validating data collected through interviews, observations, and documentation.

Time triangulation: conducting follow-up interviews to confirm the consistency of participants' responses over time.

Member checking was also carried out, where participants were invited to review the summarized findings to verify the accuracy of interpretations. This step helped ensure that the researcher's conclusions authentically represented participants' perspectives and experiences.

Time and Place of Research

The research was conducted in Bahagia Subdistrict, Bekasi City, an urban area characterized by dense residential settlements and diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. The fieldwork took place over a period of three months, from March to May 2024. This duration allowed the researcher to build rapport with participants and to observe communication in both structured (interviews) and natural (daily interaction) settings.

Bahagia Subdistrict was chosen purposively because of its observable concentration of single-parent households, particularly those headed by women. The community's openness and accessibility made it an ideal site for studying communication dynamics in the context of fatherlessness.

4. Results and Discussion

Overview of the Research Area

Bahagia Subdistrict is located in North Bekasi City, West Java—an area marked by dense population, economic diversity, and strong community interdependence. Most residents belong to the middle-to-lower economic class, with livelihoods ranging from small-scale trade to factory work. Within this environment, social life is often communal and family-centered, yet many households face challenges associated with economic instability and separation.

The phenomenon of fatherlessness is increasingly visible in Bahagia Subdistrict. Interviews with community leaders and residents revealed that a growing number of children live with single mothers due to divorce, abandonment, or the father's long-term absence for work. The emotional impact of this absence is evident in children's behavior and academic performance. Teachers in local schools have reported instances of decreased participation, emotional sensitivity, and difficulties in concentration among students from fatherless families.

The three single mothers featured in this study—Ibu Sri Uryati, Ibu Rivaliana, and Ibu Farisa—each navigate unique challenges while maintaining close relationships with their children. Despite differing circumstances, they share a common approach: using communication as the primary tool to sustain emotional stability and foster resilience in their children.

Communication Patterns Between Mothers and Children

Openness and Emotional Sharing

One of the most striking findings from the fieldwork is the emphasis on openness between mothers and children. Each mother expressed the importance of maintaining transparent dialogue, particularly regarding emotions, responsibilities, and life challenges. As DeVito (2019) emphasizes, openness forms the foundation of effective interpersonal communication, enabling trust and reducing emotional distance.

Ibu Sri Uryati demonstrated this openness in her daily interaction with her daughter Yuli. During the interview, she explained:

“I always tell Yuli what I feel—if I'm sad, tired, or worried, I don't hide it. I want her to know that being honest is important, even when life is hard.”

This candid communication allows Yuli to reciprocate honesty and develop empathy for her mother's struggles. Such openness mirrors DeVito's (2019) idea that mutual disclosure enhances psychological closeness and understanding. It also reflects Bowlby's (1988) attachment theory, where emotional transparency strengthens the security of parent-child relationships.

Empathy and Emotional Support

The dimension of empathy emerged strongly in interactions between Ibu Rivaliana and her son Fatar. After her divorce, she noticed that her son often became quiet and easily irritated. Instead of scolding, she chose to respond empathetically, trying to understand the feelings behind his behavior.

“When Fatar is angry or doesn’t want to talk, I don’t force him. I wait until he feels ready, and then I just listen,” she said.

This communicative patience aligns with Rogers’ (1961) notion of unconditional positive regard, where empathy serves as a form of emotional acceptance rather than correction. As a result, Fatar gradually became more expressive about his feelings of loneliness and missing his father.

The presence of empathy in communication builds an emotional buffer that helps children navigate internal conflict. It reinforces what Skuse (2020) calls affective attunement—the parent’s capacity to recognize and respond to the child’s emotional state. Through such communication, mothers foster a sense of safety and belonging, even in the absence of a father figure.

Supportiveness and Encouragement

Another critical pattern observed is supportiveness, expressed through encouragement and verbal affirmation. Ibu Farisa, a mother of two children, described how she uses supportive communication to motivate her sons, Fadlan and Afif, in academic and social life:

“I often say, ‘You can do it, Nak, even if Papa isn’t here. We can manage together.’ I want them to feel that our family is still strong.”

Such messages demonstrate how communication acts as a psychological reinforcement. According to Johnson (2020), parental affirmation enhances children’s self-efficacy and resilience. Supportive dialogue empowers children to face challenges without feeling incomplete or disadvantaged due to their father’s absence.

In all three families, the mothers used a combination of affection, humor, and verbal praise to reinforce positive behavior. These expressions of support play a compensatory role, substituting for the paternal encouragement that is missing from daily life.

Positivity and Optimism

Positive communication, as highlighted by DeVito (2019), involves maintaining a hopeful tone even during stressful conditions. In this study, positivity appeared in the mothers’ efforts to normalize their family condition and prevent their children from feeling stigmatized.

For instance, Yuli shared that her mother often reminded her:

“Even though we’re just the two of us, that doesn’t mean our family is incomplete. What matters is that we love and respect each other.”

This kind of dialogue reframes the meaning of fatherlessness—from a source of shame to a narrative of strength and unity. It aligns with research by Doherty (1998), who found that optimism in parental communication promotes psychological adjustment in children of single parents.

Equality and Respect

Finally, equality emerged as a defining element of mother–child communication. All mothers in this study treated their children as conversational partners whose opinions mattered. This egalitarian approach allowed children to develop confidence and critical thinking.

Ibu Rivaliana explained:

“Sometimes I ask Fatar what he thinks about our problems. I tell him that his opinion is important. That way, he learns responsibility.”

This respect-based dialogue is consistent with social learning theory, which posits that children internalize behavioral norms from their caregivers (Bandura, 1986). By involving children in decision-making, mothers teach them empathy, accountability, and maturity.

Communication Barriers and Adaptive Strategies

Despite the strengths of these interactions, several communication barriers were identified, particularly psychological and emotional barriers (Tubbs & Moss, 2008).

Emotional Avoidance and Overprotection

One common barrier involved emotional avoidance—both mothers and children sometimes refrained from discussing the father’s absence to avoid sadness or conflict. Ibu Farisa admitted:

“Sometimes I don’t talk about their father because I don’t want them to cry or feel hurt again.”

While well-intentioned, this avoidance can create emotional distance and limit openness (Effendy, 2018). To overcome this, the mothers gradually introduced discussions about the past in a neutral and affirming way, focusing on the importance of forgiveness and acceptance rather than blame.

Stress and Fatigue

Another challenge stems from economic pressures and exhaustion. As single providers, the mothers often struggle with work–life balance, which occasionally affects their patience and communication tone. As Ibu Sri Uryati reflected:

“When I’m tired from work, sometimes I get irritated easily. Later, I feel guilty because I know Yuli just needs attention.”

Such stress-induced communication breakdowns are consistent with the role strain described in Social Role Theory (Biddle, 1986; Anglin et al., 2022). However, the mothers managed these tensions by practicing self-regulation and scheduling intentional bonding time—such as shared meals or evening conversations—to reestablish emotional connection.

External Social Stigma

A subtler but significant barrier comes from societal perceptions. In many Indonesian communities, single mothers often face judgment or pity, which can indirectly affect children’s self-perception (Mayangsari & Umroh, 2020). The participants addressed this by cultivating internal family pride and emphasizing moral values over social approval. This adaptation echoes findings by Duxbury et al. (2021), showing that mothers who redefine family success in nontraditional terms maintain stronger psychological resilience.

The Mother’s Dual Role and Application of Social Role Theory

Social Role Theory offers a useful lens for interpreting the experiences of these mothers. Traditionally, Indonesian culture distinguishes between the roles of fathers (providers, protectors) and mothers (nurturers, caregivers). When fathers are absent, mothers must negotiate these boundaries and perform both roles simultaneously (Biddle, 1986; Duxbury et al., 2021).

The participants’ narratives illustrate this dual-role adaptation vividly. Ibu Sri Uryati works full time while also managing household responsibilities, balancing discipline with affection. Ibu Rivaliana takes on the role of emotional counselor, encouraging her son to express vulnerability without shame. Meanwhile, Ibu Farisa embodies both authority and warmth—maintaining household stability while motivating her sons to study and behave responsibly.

Their communication styles reveal what Anglin et al. (2022) describe as role flexibility—the ability to shift behaviors and attitudes according to situational demands. Instead of viewing their dual role as a burden, these mothers reinterpret it as an opportunity for personal growth and empowerment. Through empathy, openness, and shared resilience, they reconstruct family harmony in the absence of traditional structures.

Integrative Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce and expand upon existing research in interpersonal and family communication. Consistent with DeVito’s (2019) framework, communication characterized by openness, empathy, support, positiveness, and equality effectively mitigates

emotional distress and strengthens relational bonds. This demonstrates that communication is not a passive activity but an intentional process of emotional reconstruction.

Moreover, the study supports Bowlby's (1988) assertion that secure attachment can form even in nontraditional family structures, provided that emotional responsiveness is consistent. The mothers' ability to engage in supportive dialogue compensates for the absence of paternal involvement, validating McLanahan's (2015) findings on resilience in single-parent families.

In applying Social Role Theory, this study also highlights a sociocultural transformation: single mothers in Bahagia Subdistrict redefine conventional gender roles through communication. By integrating nurturance and authority, they challenge traditional expectations while maintaining cultural values of compassion and responsibility.

Ultimately, interpersonal communication serves as both a coping strategy and a transformative practice—allowing single mothers and their children to transcend the limitations of fatherlessness. Through words, gestures, and shared meaning, they rebuild emotional continuity and reaffirm that family is not defined by structure but by connection.

5. Conclusions

This study examined the dynamics of interpersonal communication between mothers and their children in reducing the effects of fatherlessness in Bahagia Subdistrict, Bekasi City. The findings demonstrate that communication serves not only as an exchange of messages but also as a process of emotional reconstruction that allows families to adapt and thrive despite structural challenges.

Interpersonal communication built on openness, empathy, supportiveness, positiveness, and equality enables single mothers to foster trust and emotional security in their children. The mothers in this study—Ibu Sri Uryati, Ibu Rivaliana, and Ibu Farisa—demonstrated how deliberate communication helps restore confidence, reinforce family unity, and nurture children's resilience in the absence of a father. Their interactions reflect the practical application of Social Role Theory, where mothers adaptively perform dual roles traditionally associated with both parents.

The findings reveal three major insights. First, communication is a healing medium—it allows emotional wounds caused by separation or absence to be addressed through openness and empathy. Second, communication is a learning process, where children internalize values of honesty, independence, and emotional intelligence from their mothers. Third, communication becomes a transformative act, enabling mothers to redefine family structures while maintaining harmony and affection.

This research underscores that fatherlessness, though emotionally challenging, does not inevitably lead to dysfunction. With consistent and responsive interpersonal communication, single mothers can cultivate emotionally healthy environments that empower children to grow with confidence and dignity. Future studies may expand this research by exploring digital communication between single parents and children or by comparing fatherless family dynamics across urban and rural settings in Indonesia.

Ultimately, the essence of family communication lies not in the presence of two parents, but in the quality of empathy, trust, and warmth exchanged among those who remain. The mothers of Bahagia Subdistrict exemplify how love expressed through words and understanding can rebuild what absence has taken away.

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