

**THE PHENOMENON OF FATHERLESSNESS IN BROKEN HOME
FAMILIES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MURRAY BOWEN'S
THEORY**

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Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengkaji fenomena ketiadaan peran ayah dalam keluarga broken home di Desa Blumbungan, Kecamatan Larangan, Kabupaten Pamekasan, dengan menggunakan perspektif Terori Sistem Keluarga Murray Bowen. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk menganalisis dinamika hubungan emosional dalam keluarga yang mengalami ketiadaan ayah, baik secara fisik maupun emosional. Metode yang digunakan adalah pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi, wawancara mendalam, dan dokumentasi. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ketiadaan ayah menyebabkan ketidakseimbangan emosional dalam sistem keluarga, yang berdampak pada perkembangan psikologi anak, termasuk rendahnya kepercayaan diri, penarikan diri dari sosial, dan ketidakstabilan emosional, segitiga, diferensiasi diri, dan pola fungsi berlebih-kurang berfungsi. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa ketiadaan ayah secara signifikan mengganggu sistem emosional keluarga, sehingga membutuhkan intervensi integratif untuk menjaga kesejahteraan emosional anak.

Kata Kunci: Fatherless, Broken Home, Sistem Keluarga, Murray Bowen.

***Abstract:** This study examines the phenomenon of fatherlessness in broken homes in Blumbungan Village, Larangan District, Pamekasan Regency, using Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory perspective. The purpose of this study is to analyze the dynamics of emotional relationships in families experiencing fatherlessness, both physically and emotionally. The method used is a qualitative case study approach. Data were collected through direct observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The research findings indicate that fatherlessness causes emotional imbalance in the family system, which has an impact on children's psychological development, including low self-confidence, social withdrawal, and emotional instability, triangles, self-differentiation, and patterns of over-functioning under-functioning. This study concludes that fatherlessness significantly disrupts the family's emotional system, thus requiring integrative interventions to maintain children's emotional well-being.*

Keywords: Fatherless, Broken Home, Family System, Murray Bowen.

INTRODUCTION

The family is the smallest social unit that plays a central role in shaping an individual's character and personality. Ideally, the synergy between the roles of father and mother forms the primary foundation for balanced family functioning. However, social reality shows that many families fail to maintain this harmony, leading to the phenomenon of broken homes. This condition is characterized by domestic discord that threatens the stability of childcare (Santrock, 2019; Hurlock, 2017).

One significant impact of broken homes is the emergence of fatherlessness, referring to the physical and psychological absence of a father in a child's life. This absence—whether caused by divorce, labor migration, or low emotional involvement—has been shown to hinder child development, resulting in low self-esteem and difficulties in emotional regulation (Lamb, 2010; McLanahan et al., 2013). In many rural contexts, including Blumbungan Village, fatherlessness is often not only a result of divorce but also of fathers working outside the region, which creates a form of “present-absence” that is socially normalized yet emotionally impactful on family members.

To analyze these dynamics, Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory provides a relevant framework. Bowen (1978) views the family as an interconnected emotional unit, where dysfunction in one member disrupts the balance of the entire system (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). However, most applications of Bowen's theory tend to assume relatively stable nuclear family structures, making it less sensitive to contextual variations found in rural communities where extended kinship, social norms, and economic pressures significantly shape family interactions.

Several previous studies have explored the impact of fatherlessness from a general psychological perspective. Research by Syamsul Arifin (2025) emphasizes the crucial role of fathers in adolescent identity formation, while Ahmad Mu'adz (2024) highlights how paternal involvement influences academic achievement. Nevertheless, these studies predominantly position fatherlessness as an individual-level problem, with limited attention to how it restructures the emotional system of the family as a whole, particularly within specific socio-cultural settings.

Blumbungan Village presents a unique context for examining this issue, as it is characterized by strong communal values, close kinship ties, and social expectations that often discourage the open expression of family conflict. In such a setting, family problems—including fatherlessness—tend to be managed collectively but also emotionally suppressed, creating a complex dynamic that is highly relevant for analysis through a systemic lens.

Therefore, this study aims to describe and analyze the phenomenon of fatherlessness in broken homes in Blumbungan Village based on Bowen's Family Systems Theory. This research argues that the strong kinship-based social structure of rural communities does not simply mitigate the impact of fatherlessness, but instead creates a unique form of systemic adaptation that, while maintaining social stability, simultaneously generates hidden emotional burdens for family members, particularly children and caregivers.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs an empirical social research approach (field research) with a qualitative method to examine the phenomenon of fatherlessness in broken home families. The qualitative approach is used to explore and understand the meaning of social phenomena from the participants' perspectives, particularly related to family experiences and emotional dynamics (Creswell & Poth, 2023). This approach is considered appropriate because the study focuses on naturally occurring family interactions and the subjective experiences of individuals within the family system.

The research was conducted in Blumbungan Village, Larangan District, Pamekasan Regency. This location was selected purposively due to its distinctive rural characteristics, including strong kinship values, religious norms, and the prevalence of father absence caused by divorce and labor

migration. These conditions make Blumbungan Village a relevant context for analyzing family systems, particularly within the framework of Bowen's Family Systems Theory.

The subjects of this study consist of children experiencing fatherlessness, as well as other relevant informants who are directly involved in the family system. These include mothers, extended family members (such as grandparents or uncles), teachers, and community or religious leaders. Informants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that the data obtained is rich, relevant, and capable of reflecting the complexity of family dynamics (Palinkas et al., 2022).

The data sources in this study consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through direct observation and in-depth interviews with informants, focusing on emotional relationships, caregiving patterns, and family adaptation in the absence of a father figure. Secondary data were collected from recent academic literature, previous empirical studies, and relevant normative references, including family law perspectives such as the Kompilasi Hukum Islam (KHI) and contemporary policies related to child and family protection (UNICEF, 2023).

Data collection techniques include observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observation was conducted to understand the real conditions of family interactions within the community (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2022). In-depth interviews were carried out to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and emotional responses to fatherlessness (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Documentation was used to complement and validate the findings obtained from observations and interviews.

The data analysis technique follows the interactive qualitative analysis model developed by Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing as refined in recent qualitative analysis frameworks (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2024). Data reduction involves selecting and simplifying relevant information, while data display organizes the data systematically to facilitate interpretation. The final stage involves drawing conclusions based on patterns and relationships identified in the data.

To ensure data validity, this study applies triangulation techniques. Source triangulation is conducted by comparing information obtained from children with data from mothers, extended family members, and community figures. Method triangulation is applied by cross-checking findings from interviews, observations, and documentation. These techniques are used to enhance the credibility and reliability of the research findings (Flick, 2022).

Considering the sensitive nature of the topic, this study also emphasizes research ethics. The researcher ensures the confidentiality and anonymity of all informants by not disclosing their identities and by presenting the data in a way that protects their emotional well-being, in line with recent ethical standards in qualitative research (Israel, 2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Disruption of the Family Emotional System, From Bowen's perspective, the family is understood as an interconnected emotional unit where changes in one member influence the entire system (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Therefore, the absence of a father is not merely a physical condition but also impacts the equilibrium of emotional management, role distribution, and relational stability within the family.

In Blumbungan Village, the "fatherless" phenomenon occurs predominantly due to divorce and the practice of merantau (labor migration), which is socially accepted as an economic survival strategy. However, this normalization often masks the emotional strain experienced by family members. One child stated, "father is rarely home, so we've become used to being alone," indicating an emotional adaptation rather than the fulfillment of genuine emotional needs. Mothers also experience significant pressure as they must fulfill dual roles, as expressed by an informant who stated she must be "strong on her own because there is no one to replace the father at home."

Comparatively, fatherlessness due to divorce tends to trigger more overt and conflictual emotional ruptures, whereas migration-related absence produces a subtler but prolonged emotional distance. Although these families may appear socially functional, they experience internal emotional fragmentation that threatens family harmony.

Differentiation of Self, The concept of differentiation of self in Bowen's theory is understood as an individual's capacity to maintain emotional autonomy while staying connected to others (Bowen, 1978). In other words, a person with a high level of differentiation can remain emotionally independent while maintaining social relationships. Conversely, low differentiation is characterized by emotional dependence, impulsivity, and identity confusion (Skowron & Dendy, 2022).

Findings in Blumbungan Village indicate that children growing up in fatherless environments tend to struggle in this area. They often appear less confident, have difficulty regulating their emotions, and lack independence in decision-making. One informant described this condition by noting that the child is "easily offended and often stays silent when there are problems at home."

Furthermore, in migration cases, confusion regarding authority figures arises because the father is symbolically present but absent in daily interaction. Meanwhile, in divorce cases, children tend to detach emotionally more quickly, though they still carry unresolved feelings of loss. This suggests that different forms of fatherlessness produce distinct patterns of psychological adaptation.

Triangles in Family Relationships, In Bowen's theory, triangles represent a fundamental structural pattern in family systems where tension between two individuals is diverted by involving a third party (Bowen, 1978; Titelman, 2014). While this mechanism may temporarily stabilize conflict, it often shifts the emotional burden onto the third party.

This phenomenon is quite evident in Blumbungan Village, particularly in divorced families. Children often serve as communication intermediaries between parents. One informant mentioned, "if I want to talk to my father, it usually goes through me first," placing the child in a psychologically taxing position.

Low differentiation of self also increases the likelihood of triangulation, as emotionally dependent children are more easily drawn into parental conflicts. In migration cases, triangles may not be as explicit but manifest as emotional alliances between the child and the mother or other family members, such as grandparents. This confirms that a father's physical absence does not eliminate triangulation; it simply shifts it into alternative relational patterns.

Emotional Cutoff, Emotional cutoff is the process of reducing or severing emotional contact to manage unresolved tension (Bowen, 1978; Kerr, 2019). Although it may serve as a coping strategy, it can weaken emotional bonds in the long term.

In Blumbungan Village, this phenomenon is closely linked to the culture of merantau, which is viewed as a form of economic responsibility. However, interviews reveal that prolonged physical distance gradually erodes emotional closeness. One child remarked, "even though father sends money, we still aren't close," illustrating the gap between material provision and emotional needs.

Interestingly, economic contribution is often used as a justification to mask emotional absence. In migration cases, this condition is normalized because the father is seen as still fulfilling his role. In contrast, in divorce cases, emotional cutoff occurs more drastically due to direct conflict. This indicates that the cultural acceptance of migration can obscure psychological impacts that are deeply significant for the child.

Overfunctioning–Underfunctioning, Within a family system, the overfunctioning–underfunctioning pattern describes a role imbalance where one party takes on excessive responsibility while the other becomes passive (Bowen, 1978; Kerr, 2019).

In Blumbungan Village, this is clearly visible in the role of the mother, who carries a "double burden" as both the primary provider and caregiver. One informant stated, "I handle everything, from the money to the children's problems," reflecting a dominant overfunctioning role.

Conversely, children tend to exhibit underfunctioning behaviors, such as high emotional dependency and a lack of independence in social settings or decision-making. This pattern is more pronounced in divorce cases due to the total absence of the father. However, in migration cases, despite financial needs being met, emotional absence still forces the mother to over-compensate. This reinforces the idea that a father’s emotional presence is more crucial than physical or financial contribution in maintaining the balance of the family system.

Table of Research Findings To provide a comprehensive synthesis of the findings discussed above, the following table summarizes the relationship between empirical data and Bowen’s Family Systems Theory.

Table 1. Summary of Research Findings on Fatherlessness in Blumbungan Village

No	Research Aspect	Empirical Findings	Analysis (Bowen Theory Perspective)	Implications
1	Family Emotional System	Emotional instability, role confusion, psychological pressure	System disruption (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988)	Functionally stable but emotionally fragile family
2	Differentiation of Self	Low confidence, emotional dependence, identity confusion	Low differentiation (Bowen, 1978; Skowron & Dendy, 2022)	Weak emotional autonomy
3	Triangles	Child as intermediary in parental communication	Emotional tension redistribution (Bowen, 1978; Titelman, 2014)	Psychological burden on the child
4	Emotional Cutoff	Emotional distance despite financial support (<i>merantau</i>)	Emotional disconnection (Bowen, 1978; Kerr, 2019)	Hidden emotional loss masked by economic roles
5	Overfunctioning–Underfunctioning	Mother's double burden, passive/dependent child	Role imbalance (Bowen, 1978; Kerr, 2019)	Long-term dependency patterns

Critical Analysis of Bowen’s Theory in Rural Context

Based on the summary of findings presented above, a deeper critical reflection is necessary to understand the broader implications of this study. These findings reinforce Bowen’s assumption that the family operates as an emotional unit in which the absence of one key member significantly disrupts systemic balance. However, this study also reveals a contextual limitation of Bowen’s theory, particularly in rural settings such as Blumbungan Village. While Bowen emphasizes internal emotional processes, this research demonstrates that socio-cultural factors—such as kinship systems, economic pressures, and the normalization of labor migration—play a crucial role in shaping family dynamics.

This indicates that fatherlessness in rural contexts is not merely a psychological issue but also a socio-cultural phenomenon. Therefore, integrating Bowen's theoretical framework with a socio-cultural perspective provides a more comprehensive understanding of family resilience and vulnerability in such communities.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that fatherlessness in Blumbungan Village is a complex systemic phenomenon that goes beyond mere physical absence. Within the framework of Bowen's Family Systems Theory, the absence of a father—whether due to divorce or the socially normalized practice of merantau—disrupts the family's emotional equilibrium. While migration is often viewed through an economic lens, it frequently masks a "present-absence" that leads to internal emotional fragmentation.

The findings reveal that these families develop specific systemic adaptations. Low differentiation of self in children manifests as emotional dependency and diminished confidence. Furthermore, the system manages tension through triangulation, where children often carry the psychological burden of becoming intermediaries between parents, and emotional cutoff, where financial support from afar fails to bridge the growing emotional distance. The resulting overfunctioning-underfunctioning pattern—where mothers bear a double burden while children become passive—confirms that emotional presence, rather than just economic contribution, is the primary stabilizer of the family unit.

Ultimately, the strong kinship ties in this rural context provide a facade of social stability that often obscures deep-seated emotional strain. This research recommends an integrative approach that moves beyond legal and economic support to include psycho-educational interventions. Strengthening the emotional autonomy of family members and fostering healthier communication patterns are essential to mitigating the long-term systemic impact of fatherlessness.

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