

Father Absence and Psychological Distress Among Adolescents: The Mediating Role of Perceived Ambiguous Loss

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ABSTRACT

Father absence is a relational condition associated with adolescent psychological health, particularly when the absence is experienced as an ambiguous form of relational loss. This study examined the relationship between father absence and psychological distress and the mediating role of perceived ambiguous loss. A quantitative explanatory cross-sectional survey was conducted with 415 high school students aged 15–17 years selected through multistage cluster sampling. Father absence was measured using the Father-Love Absence Scale (FLAS: 18 items; $\alpha = 0.93$), perceived ambiguous loss using the Perceived Ambiguous Loss Scale (PALS: 13 items; $\alpha = 0.89$), and psychological distress using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (KPD: 10 items; $\alpha = 0.88$). Data were analyzed using PROCESS Macro for SPSS Model 4 with 5,000 bootstrap resamples and 95% confidence intervals. Father absence was positively associated with perceived ambiguous loss ($B = 0.51$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$), while perceived ambiguous loss was positively associated with psychological distress ($B = 0.34$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .001$). The direct effect of father absence on psychological distress remained significant ($B = 0.18$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < .001$), and the indirect effect through perceived ambiguous loss was significant ($B = 0.17$, 95% CI [0.10, 0.25]), indicating partial mediation. These findings highlight the importance of addressing ambiguous relational loss in Islamic Education Guidance and Counseling services for students experiencing father absence.

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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a developmental period marked by intense psychological, social, and relational changes. During this phase, relationships with parents remain a crucial context for psychological well-being, despite the increasing need for autonomy and peer relationships. The quality of parent-adolescent relationships, family support, and parental involvement are associated with various indicators of mental health, including depression, anxiety, and psychological distress (Davis et al., 2022; Fitzpatrick et al., 2024; Qu et al., 2021). A population study of adolescents in 67 low- and middle-income countries showed that psychological distress was negatively correlated with parental involvement (Tian et al., 2021). Longitudinal findings also suggest that the quality of parent-adolescent relationships can predict subsequent psychological outcomes, with positive relationships playing a protective role and family conflict associated with increased distress (Qu et al., 2021; Sakai et al., 2025). Thus, family relationships can be a source of both support and psychological vulnerability during adolescence.

In this context, paternal involvement deserves attention. Paternal involvement is not only about physical presence but also encompasses emotional involvement, communication, support, supervision, and participation in the child's life. A study of 537 adolescents showed that parental

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involvement, including fathers, was associated with adolescent behavioral problems after considering the general structure of psychopathology (Davis et al., 2022). In early adolescents in China, the quality of the father-adolescent relationship was also associated with depressive symptoms (Zhang et al., 2022), while longitudinal evidence suggests that characteristics of relationships with fathers and mothers during adolescence may have implications for health in adulthood (Ford et al., 2023). These findings suggest that fatherhood should not be understood solely in terms of cohabitation, but also in terms of the quality and meaningfulness of the father-child relationship.

This issue becomes even more important when fathers are absent, or their involvement is very limited. Father absence can manifest in various forms, including absence due to divorce or separation, long-term separation, communication breakdowns, and low emotional presence even when the father is physically present in the family. Longitudinal research based on the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC) of up to 8,409 children showed that father absence in childhood was associated with a higher trajectory of depressive symptoms throughout adolescence and early adulthood (Culpin et al., 2022). In adolescents with depression in China, father absence was also associated with hostility, with self-esteem and frustration tolerance as possible mechanisms explaining this relationship (Liu et al., 2023). These findings suggest that father absence may be associated with a variety of psychological difficulties and may involve specific psychological mechanisms, rather than simply reduced physical interaction.

However, father absence cannot be treated as a homogeneous experience. The objective status of a father not living with a child does not explain whether this condition is perceived as a loss, conflict, disconnection, or a state of adaptive acceptance. Adolescents' perceptions of the quality of their parental relationship have been shown to have implications for psychological distress later in life (Sakai et al., 2025). In post-divorce families, adolescents' experiences of changing relationships are also influenced by incomplete or contradictory information and how they assess and compare family relationships (Fang & Zartler, 2024). Thus, research on father absence needs to move beyond simply identifying the presence or absence of fathers to understanding how this absence is subjectively experienced by adolescents.

The Ambiguous Loss Theory perspective provides a foundation for understanding these experiences. Boss (2007) explains ambiguous loss as a loss when status of existence or relationship with a significant other is uncertain. This theory distinguishes two main forms: a person is physically absent but remains psychologically present, or physically present but psychologically absent. Unlike loss due to death, which provides certainty, ambiguous loss maintains uncertainty, allowing hope, longing, attachment, and ambivalence to coexist (Boss, 2007). The relevance of this theory to the issue of fatherhood has a strong conceptual basis because the early development of Boss's thinking about ambiguous loss also relates to conditions where the father is physically present but psychologically absent from the family system (Boss, 2007).

In the context of adolescence, father absence can be an experience of ambiguous loss when the father's physical absence is not accompanied by certainty about the continuity and meaning of the emotional relationship. A father can remain a figure who is missed, hoped for, and thought about even though he is absent from daily life; conversely, a father who lives with the family but provides minimal communication, support, and emotional involvement can also be perceived as "present but absent." Thus, the main issue is not merely the loss of physical contact, but rather uncertainty about the existence and continuity of the relationship (Boss, 1983, 2007, 2026). Findings Fang & Zartler (2024) supports this perspective by showing that adolescents from post-divorce families may experience family relationships as ambiguous and respond to this by attempting to repair the relationship, accept the ambiguity, or create distance. Meanwhile, narrative reviews Leitch (2022) shows that separation and loss in children in out-of-home care can involve repeated losses,

relationship uncertainty, changes in attachment figures, and experiences of loss that are not always recognized as grief experiences.

Further conceptual and psychometric developments have shown the importance of distinguishing between the state of loss, the perception of loss, and the psychological response to loss. Comtesse et al., (2023) developed the Ambiguous Loss Inventory Plus (ALI+) to capture psychological responses to ambiguous loss and differentiate them from psychopathological symptoms such as depression, anxiety, or distress. Boss, (2026) also emphasizes that the phenomenon of ambiguous loss needs to be distinguished from psychometrically measured constructs because uncertainty is an inherent characteristic of the experience. Therefore, the concept of perceived ambiguous loss becomes relevant as a subjective experience regarding the uncertainty of the status or continuity of a relationship with a significant figure (Boss, 2026). This position allows perceived ambiguous loss to be distinguished from father absence as a relational condition and psychological distress as a psychological outcome.

Theoretically, perceived ambiguous loss has the potential to explain how father absence is related to psychological distress. Unclear relationships with fathers can simultaneously maintain attachment, longing, hope, and ambivalence, leading adolescents to face an adjustment process without a clear endpoint. This aligns with findings that the quality of family relationships is related to adolescents' psychological well-being (Fitzpatrick et al., 2024; Qu et al., 2021; Sakai et al., 2025; Wang & Chen, 2023). Wang & Chen (2023) for example, showed that family relationships and teacher–student relationships mediated the relationship between maltreatment experiences and psychological distress, whereas Fitzpatrick et al., (2024) found that higher family support was associated with lower symptoms of depression and anxiety. Thus, interpersonal relationships may be a mechanism linking adversity experiences to distress. However, existing research has not specifically examined whether ambiguity and uncertainty regarding the relationship with the father, understood as perceived ambiguous loss, is a psychological mechanism between father absence and psychological distress.

This gap can be formulated in several aspects. First, longitudinal studies have shown a link between father absence and mental health problems, but the underlying psychological mechanisms still require further elucidation (Culpin et al., 2022). Second, research examining the mechanisms of father absence has highlighted self-esteem and frustration tolerance, but has not specifically examined perceived ambiguous loss as a mechanism of relational loss (Liu et al., 2023). Third, research on ambiguity in family relationships among adolescents still largely uses a qualitative approach and focuses on the post-divorce family context (Fang & Zartler, 2024). Fourth, the development of ambiguous loss measurement is still relatively new and its application to the experience of father absence in school students is still open to development (Boss, 2026; Comtesse et al., 2023).

This gap becomes even more relevant for high school students because father absence does not always result in the same psychological experiences. Students whose fathers do not live at home may still receive adequate communication and support, while those whose fathers live at home may experience psychological absence due to low emotional involvement. Therefore, researching all students without first categorizing them as "fatherless" or "non-fatherless" allows for a more sensitive study of variations in father absence experiences and perceived ambiguous loss, in line with the assumption that ambiguous loss is a subjective experience (Boss, 2026; Fang & Zartler, 2024).

From the perspective of Islamic Educational Guidance and Counseling, this approach also has practical implications. Counselors may encounter students who appear to be functioning well academically and socially but experience longing, ambivalence, or uncertainty regarding their relationship with their father. Understanding perceived ambiguous loss allows counselors not only to identify family structures but also to explore how students interpret their father's absence, maintain or adjust expectations, and utilize psychological, social, and spiritual resources to cope with

uncertainty (Boss, 2026; Leitch, 2022). Within the Islamic Educational Guidance and Counseling framework, this understanding can form the basis for developing services that are oriented towards acceptance, meaningfulness, emotional regulation, strengthening social support, and developing adaptive spiritual resources.

Based on these arguments, this study positions father absence as a relational condition, perceived ambiguous loss as a subjective experience of uncertain loss, and psychological distress as a psychological outcome. The proposed model suggests that the stronger the experience of father absence, the more likely students are to perceive the relationship as an ambiguous loss, which is subsequently associated with higher psychological distress. Thus, this study not only examines the direct relationship between father absence and psychological distress but also examines perceived ambiguous loss as a psychological mechanism explaining this relationship. This approach is expected to expand the application of Ambiguous Loss Theory in the context of adolescent development while providing an empirical basis for the development of Islamic Guidance and Counseling assessments and services that are more sensitive to the experience of relational loss that is not always directly visible. Based on this framework, this study aims to examine the relationship between father absence and psychological distress and examine the role of perceived ambiguous loss as a mediator in high school students.

METHODS

Research Design

This study used a quantitative approach with an explanatory cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationship between father absence, perceived ambiguous loss, and psychological distress in high school students. Perceived ambiguous loss was placed as a mediating variable explaining the relationship between father absence as an independent variable and psychological distress as a dependent variable. The research model tested the direct effect of father absence on psychological distress as well as the indirect effect through perceived ambiguous loss. A cross-sectional design was chosen because it allows for efficient testing of relationship and mediation models on a student population within a single data collection period. However, because the data were collected at a single point in time, interpretation of the results is limited to statistical relationships and indirect effects, not causal relationships.

Participant and Procedure

The study participants were 415 high school students aged 15–18 years who were registered as active students at the time of the study. The study did not screen for fatherlessness or for living with a father, as father absence is conceptualized as a construct that varies among students rather than as a group category. Therefore, all students who met the inclusion criteria had the opportunity to participate, including those living with their fathers, those not living with their fathers, and those experiencing psychologically limited father presence. Sampling was conducted using multistage cluster sampling, with schools as the initial cluster unit and classes as subsequent selection units. Inclusion criteria were active students, being within the research age range, obtaining consent to participate in accordance with ethical procedures, and being able to complete the research instrument independently.

The study began with obtaining research permits from the school and obtaining ethical approval in accordance with institutional regulations. Prior to data collection, the researcher explained the purpose, procedures, data confidentiality, the voluntary nature of participation, and the participant's right to refuse to answer or discontinue participation. The questionnaire was administered anonymously and did not require unnecessary personal identification. Data collection was conducted in a structured manner at the school using online or offline questionnaires, with similar completion times for all participants. Because the study involved questions about family

relationships and psychological conditions, participants were also informed about access to school guidance and counseling services should they experience discomfort during or after completion. Prior to analysis, the data were examined to identify incomplete responses, duplicates, and unusual response patterns.

Research Instruments

Data were collected using three main instruments. Father absence was measured using the Father-Love Absence Scale (FLAS) developed by Xiang & Zhou, (2023). The FLAS consists of 18 items covering four dimensions: emotional absence, cognitive absence, behavioral absence, and volitional absence. This instrument was developed to measure adolescents' experiences of the absence of paternal love from a psychological perspective. Instrument quality testing showed that all items met validity criteria, with corrected item-total correlation (CITC) values ranging from 0.47 to 0.71. The instrument's reliability demonstrated excellent internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.93.

Perceived ambiguous loss was measured using an instrument developed in this study by adapting the constructs of boundary ambiguity and ambiguous loss perceptions rooted in Boss's Ambiguous Loss Theory. This construct was operationalized into three aspects: physical-psychological ambiguity, relational uncertainty, and relational ambivalence. The instrument was developed in the context of the father-adolescent relationship, emphasizing adolescents' perceptions of the ambiguity of loss and the relational position of the absent father. The measurement development also included the Ambiguous Loss Inventory Plus (ALI+), developed by Comtesse et al., (2023), with adjustments for the context of father absence. Test results showed CITC values ranging from 0.46–0.69 and good reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.89.

Psychological distress was measured using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10). K10 consists of 10 items that measure nonspecific psychological distress, particularly symptoms related to anxiety and depression. This instrument was chosen because it has been adapted and validated for Indonesian adolescents aged 16–18 years. Test results showed CITC values ranging from 0.49–0.67 and good reliability with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.88 (Tran et al., 2019).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in three stages. First, descriptive statistics were used to describe participant characteristics and the distribution of scores for each variable, including mean, standard deviation, minimum, maximum, skewness, and kurtosis. Second, instrument quality was evaluated through validity and reliability tests. Instrument validity was tested through content validity and item validity tests, while instrument reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. Third, hypothesis testing was conducted using the PROCESS Macro for SPSS Model 4 to examine the role of perceived ambiguous loss as a mediator in the relationship between father absence and psychological distress. Father absence was placed as a predictor variable (X), perceived ambiguous loss as a mediator (M), and psychological distress as an outcome variable (Y). The significance of direct and indirect effects was tested using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples and 95% confidence intervals. The mediation effect was declared significant if the confidence interval for the indirect effect did not include zero. Before the main analysis was conducted, the data were checked to ensure that the necessary analytical assumptions were met.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study involved 415 adolescents as participants. Based on gender characteristics, 191 participants (46.0%) were male, and 224 participants (54.0%) were female. Based on age, participants consisted of 126 adolescents aged 15 years (30.4%), 145 adolescents aged 16 years (34.9%), and 144

adolescents aged 17 years (34.7%). This distribution shows that the composition of participants was relatively even based on the 15–17 age group, with the largest proportion in the 16-year-old age group.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 415)

Characteristic	n	%
Gender		
Male	191	46.0
Female	224	54.0
Age		
15 years	126	30.4
16 years	145	34.9
17 years	144	34.7
Total	415	100.0

Descriptively, the father absence variable had an average score of 52.84 (SD = 11.21), with a score range of 21–84. The perceived ambiguous loss variable had an average score of 43.17 (SD = 9.84), with a score range of 18–72. Meanwhile, psychological distress had an average score of 23.64 (SD = 7.21), with a score range of 10–40. The skewness value for the three variables ranged from 0.18 to 0.41, while the kurtosis value ranged from –0.31 to –0.18. In general, these values indicate that the distributions of the scores for the three variables did not deviate significantly from normality.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables (N = 415)

Variable	M	SD	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
Father absence	52.84	11.21	21	84	0.18	–0.31
Perceived ambiguous loss	43.17	9.84	18	72	0.27	–0.18
Psychological distress	23.64	7.21	10	40	0.41	–0.22

Based on the results of the mediation analysis, perceived ambiguous loss was proven to act as a mediator in the relationship between father absence and psychological distress. In the mediator model, father absence had a positive and significant effect on perceived ambiguous loss (path a), with a coefficient of $B = 0.51$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = 12.75$, and $p < 0.001$. The 95% confidence interval was in the range [0.43; 0.59], which did not include the zero value. These results indicate that the higher the father absence, the higher the perceived ambiguous loss. The model predicting perceived ambiguous loss had an R^2 value of 0.28, which means that father absence explained 28% of the variation in perceived ambiguous loss.

Furthermore, in the outcome model, perceived ambiguous loss has a positive and significant effect on psychological distress (path b), with $B = 0.34$, $SE = 0.06$, $t = 5.67$, and $p < 0.001$. The 95% confidence interval of [0.22; 0.46] also does not include zero. Thus, the higher the perceived ambiguous loss, the higher the psychological distress. The outcome model shows an R^2 value of 0.37, indicating that perceived ambiguous loss, together with father absence, explains 37% of the variation in psychological distress.

After perceived ambiguous loss was included in the model, father absence still had a positive and significant direct effect on psychological distress (path c'), with $B = 0.18$, $SE = 0.05$, $t = 3.60$, and $p < 0.001$. The 95% confidence interval of [0.08; 0.28] did not include zero. This indicates that father absence is still associated with increased psychological distress even though the effect through perceived ambiguous loss has been taken into account.

Table 3. Results of the Mediation Regression Analysis of PROCESS Model 4

Models and paths	B	SE	t	p	95% CI	R ²
Mediator model: Perceived ambiguous loss						0.28
Father absence → Perceived ambiguous loss (a)	0.51	0.04	12.75	< 0.001	[0.43; 0.59]	
Outcome model: Psychological distress						0.37
Perceived ambiguous loss → Psychological distress (b)	0.34	0.06	5.67	< 0.001	[0.22; 0.46]	
Father absence → Psychological distress (c')	0.18	0.05	3.60	< 0.001	[0.08; 0.28]	
Indirect effect (ab)	0.17	0.04*			[0.10; 0.25]	
Total effect						
Father absence → Psychological distress (c)	0.35	0.05	7.00	< 0.001	[0.25; 0.45]	

Furthermore, the indirect effect of father absence on psychological distress through perceived ambiguous loss was $B = 0.17$, with a 95% confidence interval [0.10; 0.25]. Because the confidence interval did not include zero, the indirect effect was declared significant. This finding indicates that perceived ambiguous loss significantly mediates the relationship between father absence and psychological distress. In other words, father absence is not only directly related to psychological distress but also contributes to psychological distress through increasing the experience of perceived ambiguous loss.

Meanwhile, the total effect of father absence on psychological distress was positive and significant, with $B = 0.35$, $SE = 0.05$, $t = 7.00$, and $p < 0.001$. The 95% confidence interval of [0.25; 0.45] did not include zero. Compared with the direct effect after the mediator was entered ($B = 0.18$), the magnitude of the total effect ($B = 0.35$) indicates that part of the relationship between father absence and psychological distress is explained by perceived ambiguous loss.

Overall, these results indicate partial mediation. This conclusion is based on two main findings: the significant indirect effect of father absence on psychological distress through perceived ambiguous loss, while the direct effect of father absence on psychological distress, after controlling for the mediator, also remained significant. Thus, perceived ambiguous loss is one mechanism that can explain how father absence is related to the emergence of psychological distress. Higher levels of father absence lead to higher levels of perceived ambiguous loss, which ultimately leads to higher levels of psychological distress.

Discussion

This study shows that perceived ambiguous loss acts as a partial mediator in the relationship between father absence and psychological distress in high school students. Father absence is positively related to perceived ambiguous loss, and perceived ambiguous loss is in turn positively related to psychological distress. At the same time, the direct relationship between father absence and psychological distress remains significant after mediators are accounted for. This pattern suggests that the relationship between father absence and psychological distress can be understood through more than one psychological pathway, with perceived ambiguous loss as one relevant mechanism. These findings extend previous research that has demonstrated associations between father involvement, absence, and relationship quality with various indicators of adolescent mental health, but has not specifically addressed the experience of ambiguous relational loss as a mediator (Culpin et al., 2013; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003; Liu et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2026; Zhang et al., 2022). Recent longitudinal evidence also suggests that perceptions of father presence are related to depressive symptoms through processes such as beliefs about emotions and emotion regulation, further confirming that the father–adolescent relationship may operate through diverse psychological mechanisms.

The positive relationship between father absence and perceived ambiguous loss suggests that the stronger the experience of father absence, the more likely adolescents are to view the relationship with their father as a loss that is not fully clear or resolved. This finding is consistent with Ambiguous Loss Theory, which explains that ambiguous loss occurs when a significant other's physical or psychological presence has no clear status, allowing attachment and uncertainty to coexist (Betz & Thorngren, 2006; Boss, 2007). In the context of adolescence, father absence can still leave a psychological connection with the father through longing, hope, memories, or a desire for paternal involvement. Thus, the experience that emerges is not simply one of "losing a father," but rather one of uncertainty regarding the father's position in the adolescent's life. This conceptualization aligns with Fang & Zartler, (2024), who found that adolescents in post-divorce families may experience relationships with biological parents and other family members as ambiguous when information about the relationship is incomplete or contradictory and when adolescents must reassess their relationship position.

Findings Fang & Zartler, (2024) also provide important nuances to this study. They show that ambiguity does not automatically arise in all family relationships and is not experienced uniformly by all adolescents. Some adolescents may accept the relationship situation or create distance from it when it feels unclear. This helps explain why father absence in this study accounted for only 28% of the variation in perceived ambiguous loss. This means that father absence is a condition associated with the experience of ambiguous loss, but that experience is also likely influenced by the quality of father-adolescent communication, the consistency of contact, family support, family conflict, expectations of the father, and adolescents' interpretations of changes in the relationship. This view is consistent with research showing that the quality of the father-adolescent relationship is more relevant to psychological well-being than simply the structural presence of the father (Davis et al., 2022; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003; Zhang et al., 2022). In fact, research on father involvement shows that the emotional and psychological aspects of father involvement can be more consistently related to child well-being than simply the quantity of involvement in parenting activities (Culpin et al., 2013; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003).

The positive relationship between perceived ambiguous loss and psychological distress suggests that experiencing relationship uncertainty is associated with poorer psychological well-being. This is theoretically understandable because ambiguous loss does not provide clear boundaries for when the loss begins, ends, or should be accepted. Adolescents may maintain hope for a relationship with their father while simultaneously experiencing longing, disappointment, confusion, and ambivalence. This situation has the potential to complicate the adjustment process because individuals must navigate situations that lack stable relational meaning (Betz & Thorngren, 2006; Boss, 2007, 2026). Qualitative findings Fang & Zartler, (2024) supports this interpretation by showing that adolescents describe ambiguous relationships as unclear, confusing, and uncomfortable and use different strategies to cope, including repairing the relationship, accepting the ambiguity, or creating distance.

This relationship is also consistent with the broader literature on family relationship quality and adolescent mental health. Tian et al., (2021), based on data from 167,484 adolescents from 67 low- and middle-income countries, found that higher parental involvement was associated with a lower likelihood of psychological distress. Qu et al., (2021) also shows the importance of conflict and intimacy in parent-child relationships on psychological distress in adolescents, whereas Fitzpatrick et al., (2024) found a relationship between family support and lower symptoms of depression and anxiety. The findings of Sakai et al., (2025) increasingly show that adolescents' perceptions of the quality of their parental relationships are related to their psychological well-being. Thus, the results of this study extend this literature by demonstrating that the relevant relational aspects are not only support, intimacy, or conflict, but also uncertainty regarding the existence and continuity of the relationship with the father figure (Fitzpatrick et al., 2024; Qu et al., 2021; Sakai et al., 2025; Tian et al., 2021).

The direct relationship between father absence and psychological distress, which remained significant after perceived ambiguous loss was included in the model, suggests that the experience of ambiguous loss is not the only pathway related to distress. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that father absence can be related to various aspects of psychological adjustment. Culpin et al., (2013), for example, found a relationship between father absence in childhood and depressive symptoms in adolescence, whereas Zhang et al., (2022) showed that the quality of the father-adolescent relationship was related to changes in depressive symptoms. The study Liu et al., (2023) provides more specific evidence regarding other mechanisms, namely self-esteem and frustration tolerance, in the relationship between father absence and hostility. Thus, the results of this study complement previous research by demonstrating a different mechanism, namely the experience of ambiguous relational loss, while maintaining the possibility of other mechanisms such as self-esteem, emotion regulation, communication quality, social support, and family conflict (Culpin et al., 2013, 2022; Xu et al., 2026; Zhang et al., 2022).

The difference in mediation patterns with the research by Liu et al., (2023) is also interesting to note. In their study of adolescents with major depressive disorder, the relationship between father absence and hostility was no longer significant after self-esteem and frustration tolerance were included, indicating a full mediation pattern. Conversely, this study found partial mediation, as the direct relationship between father absence and psychological distress remained significant. This difference may be related to sample characteristics and differing psychological outcomes. Liu et al., (2023) used a clinical sample of adolescents with major depressive disorder and measured hostility, while this study involved high school students in a school context and used psychological distress as a more general outcome. Therefore, the findings of these two studies should not be viewed as contradictory; rather, they suggest that the mechanisms underlying the relationship between father absence and psychological conditions may differ depending on population characteristics and the type of outcome studied. Recent research on father presence has also found several mediating pathways through emotion beliefs and emotion regulation, supporting the possibility that the father-mental health relationship operates through a broader network of mechanisms than a single mediator.

The indirect effect of 0.17, with a 95% confidence interval of [0.10; 0.25], supports the role of perceived ambiguous loss as one of the psychological mechanisms linking father absence to psychological distress. Conceptually, these results suggest a relational chain: father absence is associated with increased perceptions that the relationship with the father is an ambiguous loss, while this experience is associated with higher levels of distress. The primary contribution of this study lies in shifting attention from the status of father presence to adolescents' subjective experiences of the relationship with the father. This approach aligns with the conceptual development of ambiguous loss, which emphasizes that uncertainty and relational meaning are essential components of the experience of loss (Boss, 2007; Boss & Couden, 2002; Comtesse et al., 2023; Dahl & Boss, 2020). The development of instruments for assessing ambiguous loss also increasingly emphasizes the need to differentiate ambiguous loss experiences from psychopathological symptoms, thereby making the role of perceived ambiguous loss as a mediator between relational conditions and distress conceptually relevant (Comtesse et al., 2023).

Implication

These findings have implications for Islamic Educational Guidance and Counseling, suggesting that student assessment should not stop at the question of whether the father is present or absent. Counselors need to explore how students interpret their relationships with their fathers, whether they perceive the relationship as close, inconsistent, uncertain, or emotionally distant. This approach is important because two students with relatively similar levels of father absence can have different psychological experiences. In the context of services, exploration can be directed at understanding students' longing, ambivalence, hopes, disappointments, and how they adjust to uncertain

relationships. This aligns with the finding that adolescents use different strategies to cope with the ambiguity of family relationships (Fang & Zartler, 2024). Thus, Islamic Educational Guidance and Counseling services can be directed at strengthening emotional regulation, social support, acceptance of uncontrollable conditions, and the development of adaptive psychological and spiritual resources, without assuming that all students with father absence have the same counseling needs.

Limitation

Several limitations need to be considered. First, the cross-sectional design limits interpretation to statistical relationships and indirect effects, so the temporal order between father absence, perceived ambiguous loss, and psychological distress cannot be determined. The possibility of reciprocal relationships also needs to be considered, as adolescents' psychological well-being can influence how they assess family relationships. Second, all variables were measured through self-report, so future research could consider additional data sources to reduce the possibility of common method bias. Third, perceived ambiguous loss is a relatively specific construct, and the instrument was developed for the context of father-adolescent relationships; therefore, future research needs to test its factor structure, convergent and discriminant validity, and replication across different adolescent groups and family contexts. Fourth, because the direct effect remained significant, future research should simultaneously examine other mediators, such as self-esteem, emotion regulation, father-adolescent communication quality, family conflict, and social support (Liu et al., 2023; Qu et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2026). Thus, longitudinal and multi-method research can provide a more comprehensive picture of how the experience of father absence relates to adolescent mental health.

Overall, this study demonstrates that father absence is associated with psychological distress not only directly but also through the experience of perceived ambiguous loss. Partial mediation suggests that ambiguous loss is one mechanism, not the sole mechanism, in this relationship. These findings extend the application of Ambiguous Loss Theory to the adolescent context by positioning the subjective experience of paternal relationships as a crucial aspect to understand. Therefore, attention to father absence in Islamic Educational Guidance and Counseling research and practice needs to move beyond simply identifying family structures to understanding how students experience, interpret, and adjust to relationships with fathers who are not fully present or fully clear.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that father absence is positively related to psychological distress in high school students, both directly and indirectly through perceived ambiguous loss. Father absence is associated with increased perceived ambiguous loss, while the experience of ambiguous loss is associated with higher levels of psychological distress. The significant indirect effect, coupled with the persistence of a significant direct relationship between father absence and psychological distress, indicates partial mediation, suggesting that perceived ambiguous loss is one psychological mechanism that can explain the relationship between father absence and psychological distress, but not the sole mechanism. These findings emphasize the importance of understanding father absence not only as a structural condition or as the physical presence of a father, but also as a relational experience that adolescents can interpret differently. In the context of Islamic Guidance and Counseling, the results of this study provide a basis for student assessment and services to consider how students interpret the uncertainty in their relationship with their father, and to support the processes of adjustment, emotional regulation, acceptance, and the development of adaptive psychological and spiritual resources.

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