

The Pathology of Economic Expectations: A Phenomenological Inquiry into Children's Psychological Experiences as Family Investments

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of children being positioned as future investments and economic providers remains common in collectivistic societies, where family expectations are strongly shaped by filial obligation and intergenerational reciprocity. Although parental investment has been widely associated with child development and social mobility, limited attention has been given to the psychological experiences of individuals who are expected to secure their family's future economic well-being. This study explored the lived experiences of individuals who perceived themselves as their family's future investment and primary economic provider. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed to understand the meanings attached to these experiences. The participants were two first-born young adults (aged 25–27 years) who had experienced persistent parental expectations since adolescence, assumed financial responsibilities in early adulthood, and participated in eight semi-structured interview sessions. Data were analyzed using phenomenological thematic analysis. Five themes emerged: the internalization of economic expectations as a moral obligation, conflict between personal aspirations and family obligations, psychological distress characterized by anxiety and fear of failure, perceptions of conditional parental affection, and emotional ambivalence involving gratitude, responsibility, exhaustion, and disappointment. The findings indicate that being positioned as a family investment extends beyond economic responsibility, shaping identity formation, autonomy, and psychological well-being. By examining these experiences phenomenologically, this study highlights invisible grief and identity conflict as overlooked psychological consequences of familial economic expectations. The findings extend current understanding of parental investment, family obligation, and intergenerational reciprocity while providing insights for psychologists, counselors, and families within Indonesian collectivistic contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

The family is widely recognized as the primary social institution responsible for nurturing children's development through emotional, educational, and financial investment. According to parental investment theory, such efforts promote children's developmental outcomes while enhancing family well-being across generations (Giudice, 2014; Lawson & Mace, 2011). In collectivistic societies, however, parental investment often extends beyond developmental support, as children are expected to reciprocate parental sacrifices through future economic contributions. Consequently, children may gradually occupy a dual role as both recipients of care and future providers of family security, reflecting cultural values of filial obligation, intergenerational reciprocity, and family solidarity (Fingerman et al., 2020; Silverstein et al., 2006).

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Recent demographic and socioeconomic changes have intensified intergenerational financial dependency in Indonesia. Statistics Indonesia (BPS, 2023) reported that 9.78% of the population was aged 60 years and older, while 9.36% remained below the national poverty line, increasing reliance on economically productive family members. In addition, the labor force participation rate reached 70.63% in 2024, emphasizing the central role of working-age adults in maintaining household welfare. These conditions contribute to the emergence of sandwich-generation responsibilities, in which young adults are expected to support both younger and older family members. Importantly, such responsibilities often begin long before adulthood through parental expectations that educational and occupational success should improve the family's economic condition, making future financial responsibility an integral part of children's developmental experiences.

Previous research has consistently shown that family economic pressure and excessive family obligations are associated with poorer psychological functioning, including lower emotional well-being, greater stress, role strain, emotional exhaustion, and reduced life satisfaction (Conger et al., 2010; Kahana & Kahana, 2014; Pillemer et al., 2019). Much of this literature has focused on adults who already occupy caregiving roles within multigenerational households, particularly members of the sandwich generation (Burke & Calvano, 2017). However, these psychological burdens may originate much earlier through parental expectations that encourage children to assume responsibility for their family's future economic security. Contemporary developmental research suggests that when such expectations become persistent and conditional, they may evolve into forms of parental psychological control, in which children's thoughts, emotions, and life choices become increasingly shaped by parental approval rather than personal autonomy (Barber, 1996; Barber & Harmon, 2002; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010).

According to Self-Determination Theory, autonomy is a fundamental psychological need for healthy development and identity formation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Excessive parental expectations may therefore create conflicts between personal aspirations and familial obligations, increasing vulnerability to anxiety, identity confusion, maladaptive perfectionism, and emotional distress (Luyckx et al., 2007; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). These consequences may be particularly pronounced in collectivistic cultures, where filial obligation and parental authority are strongly emphasized (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2011). Although parental involvement is often viewed as an expression of care, conditional parental regard may simultaneously foster guilt, contingent self-worth, and emotional vulnerability (Assor et al., 2004; Soenens et al., 2012). Consequently, children may gradually internalize parental expectations as moral obligations that shape their identity and future life choices.

Regardless of the substantial literature on parental psychological control, family obligation, and intergenerational support, relatively little is known about how these experiences are subjectively interpreted when they are specifically connected to expectations of future economic responsibility. Existing studies have primarily examined parental psychological control in relation to academic achievement, emotional adjustment, and behavioral outcomes, whereas research on filial obligation and intergenerational support has largely focused on levels of obligation, family support, or psychological adjustment using quantitative approaches (Fingerman et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2018; Yeh et al., 2013). Similarly, although the psychological and economic consequences experienced by members of the sandwich generation have been widely documented, limited attention has been given to the developmental process through which these responsibilities emerge long before individuals formally assume caregiving roles (Burke & Calvano, 2017). Consequently, the lived experience of growing up as a perceived family investment and future economic provider remains insufficiently understood.

This gap is particularly important because expectations of future economic reciprocity may shape children's identity, autonomy, self-worth, and life decisions in ways that extend beyond conventional parental expectations regarding academic or occupational success. Children may

gradually perceive themselves not only as family members but also as instruments through which collective family aspirations are expected to be realized. A phenomenological approach is therefore particularly appropriate because it enables an in-depth exploration of how individuals construct meaning from these experiences, negotiate tensions between personal aspirations and familial obligations, and interpret their roles as future economic providers. By examining these lived experiences within the Indonesian collectivistic context, this study seeks to extend existing knowledge on parental investment, family obligation, and intergenerational reciprocity through a richer understanding of the psychological meanings attached to familial economic expectations.

Despite growing evidence regarding parental expectations, family obligation, and intergenerational support, little is known about how individuals subjectively experience being positioned as future family investments and economic providers. A phenomenological approach is particularly appropriate because it enables an in-depth exploration of the meanings individuals construct from these lived experiences, including how they negotiate tensions between personal aspirations and familial obligations. Within the Indonesian collectivistic context, where filial responsibility and reciprocal family support remain highly valued, such experiences may shape identity development, emotional well-being, and perceptions of self-worth in ways that are not adequately captured through quantitative approaches. Therefore, this study aims to explore the lived experiences of individuals who perceive themselves as future family investments and primary economic providers. The originality of this study lies in its phenomenological examination of familial economic expectations, offering new insights into the psychological meanings of invisible grief, identity conflict, and intergenerational obligation that have received limited attention in previous psychological research.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of individuals who perceived themselves as future family investments and primary economic providers. A phenomenological design was selected because the study sought to understand how participants interpreted and constructed meaning from familial economic expectations within the context of their everyday lives. Rather than examining the prevalence or effects of these expectations, the study focused on capturing the essence of participants' subjective experiences, including how they influenced identity development, emotional responses, and life decisions. The research design followed the phenomenological approach described by Creswell and Poth (2018), emphasizing an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences through rich narrative accounts.

Participants and Procedure

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological design with purposive sampling. Two participants were selected because they met specific inclusion criteria: (a) first-born children, (b) had experienced persistent parental expectations since adolescence to improve their family's economic condition, (c) had become the primary financial provider for their family in early adulthood, and (d) were willing to participate in repeated in-depth interviews. Participant 1 (27-year-old male) was the first-born of three siblings, while Participant 2 (25-year-old female) was the first-born of two siblings. Both participants were unmarried, lived with their parents in Bekasi, Indonesia, and served as the primary breadwinners for their households. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect participants' identities.

Only two participants were included because phenomenological research emphasizes the depth and richness of lived experiences rather than sample size (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Both participants represented information-rich cases that enabled an in-depth exploration of the

phenomenon. Data were collected over approximately three months through eight semi-structured interview sessions with each participant (16 interviews in total). Each interview lasted between 60 and 120 minutes and explored family expectations, perceived obligations, experiences of becoming future economic providers, emotional responses, personal aspirations, family relationships, and the meanings attached to these experiences. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. The interview guide was developed based on the literature on parental investment, family obligation, parental psychological control, and intergenerational reciprocity, and was reviewed by two qualitative psychology researchers to ensure its relevance and clarity prior to data collection.

To ensure trustworthiness, prolonged engagement through repeated interviews, member checking, and reflective field notes were employed throughout the study. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional ethics committee, and written informed consent was secured from all participants before data collection. Interview transcripts were analyzed manually using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2021). The analysis involved repeated reading of the transcripts, inductive coding, theme development and refinement, and interpretation of the psychological meanings embedded in participants' lived experiences. Throughout the analysis, the researcher practiced reflexivity to minimize personal assumptions and maintain close engagement with participants' narratives.

Table 1. Demographic and Family Characteristics of the Participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Occupation	Background	Experience Related to Familial Economic Expectations
S1	27	Male	Private Employee	Lower-middle income family	Since adolescence, participant was expected to achieve educational and occupational success to improve the family's economic condition and support younger siblings
S2	25	Female	Teacher	Lower-income family	Participants experienced explicit parental expectations to become the family's primary source of financial support and assist parents during old age.

Research Instruments

In this study, the researcher served as the primary research instrument, being directly responsible for conducting the interviews, observing participants' verbal and non-verbal responses, and interpreting the meanings embedded in their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide developed from the study objectives and a review of the literature on parental investment, family obligation, intergenerational reciprocity, identity development, and phenomenological inquiry. The guide comprised six domains: family background and socioeconomic context, parental expectations regarding future economic responsibilities, experiences of being perceived as the family's future economic provider, emotional responses, conflicts between personal aspirations and family obligations, and the meanings attached to these experiences.

Prior to data collection, the interview guide was reviewed by two qualitative psychology experts to assess its clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives, and minor revisions were made accordingly. During the interviews, probing questions were used flexibly to facilitate richer descriptions of participants' experiences, while field notes were maintained to document contextual information, non-verbal expressions, and the researcher's reflections, thereby complementing the interview transcripts and enhancing the depth of data interpretation (Smith et al., 2022).

Trustworthiness and Data Validation

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, this study followed the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was established through prolonged engagement with participants, as each participant completed 8 interview sessions, enabling an in-depth exploration of their lived experiences. Member checking was conducted by inviting participants to review interview summaries and preliminary interpretations to ensure that the findings accurately reflected their experiences. Dependability was strengthened by maintaining an audit trail documenting the research process, interview procedures, coding decisions, and theme development. Confirmability was achieved through researcher reflexivity, including reflective field notes and continuous examination of personal assumptions throughout the analytical process. Transferability was supported by providing rich descriptions of participants' backgrounds and the research context, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar settings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the study. Before participation, all participants received detailed information regarding the purpose of the study, interview procedures, potential risks, and their rights as research participants. Written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, and participants were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms (S1 and S2) were used in all transcripts and reports, and all identifying information was removed during transcription and analysis. Audio recordings, transcripts, and research documents were securely stored and accessed only by the research team.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed manually using reflexive thematic analysis following the approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021). The analysis involved familiarization with the interview transcripts, generating initial codes, identifying and refining themes, and interpreting the meanings embedded in participants' lived experiences. Because the study involved two information-rich participants, all coding and theme development were conducted manually, without using qualitative data analysis software. The emerging themes were continuously compared with the original transcripts to ensure that they accurately represented the participants' experiences. All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and reread repeatedly to become familiar with the participants' narratives. Significant statements relevant to the research phenomenon were identified and manually coded by the researcher, without using qualitative data analysis software. Similar codes were then grouped into categories, which were subsequently synthesized into broader themes that reflected the shared meanings of participants' lived experiences. Throughout the analytical process, the researcher continuously compared the emerging themes with the original interview transcripts to ensure that the interpretations remained grounded in the participants' accounts. Reflective notes and an audit trail were maintained to document analytical decisions and enhance the transparency of the coding process.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed six major themes that characterized participants' lived experiences of being perceived as future family investments: (1) Internalization of Familial Economic Expectations, (2) The Loss of Personal Autonomy, (3) Emotional Burden and Invisible Grief, and (4) Ambivalent Meanings of Family Responsibility.

Theme 1: Family Background as the Foundation of Economic Expectations

The analysis revealed that participants' psychological experiences originated from their family backgrounds, which were characterized by persistent financial hardship and strong parental aspirations for upward socioeconomic mobility. Since childhood, both participants grew up in households where financial limitations were openly discussed and educational success was consistently framed as the primary pathway to improving the family's economic condition. These early family experiences gradually established a psychological foundation in which participants perceived themselves not merely as children, but as future agents responsible for transforming their family's economic circumstances.

Participant 1 described how financial difficulties were repeatedly emphasized within everyday family conversations:

"...I remember my parents often talking about bills, debts, and how difficult it was to support the family. My father always told me, 'You have to study hard because one day you will change our lives.' At that time, I thought it was just encouragement, but as I grew older, I realized it was actually an expectation..." (P1)

Similarly, Participant 2 recalled that economic hardship became an inseparable part of her childhood experiences.

"...Since elementary school, I already knew that money was always a problem in our family. Whenever my parents discussed the future, they always connected it with my education. They often said that I was their only hope to have a better life..." (P2)

Both participants described that conversations about financial difficulties occurred repeatedly throughout their developmental years. These experiences gradually shaped their understanding that academic achievement was not solely intended for personal success but represented an obligation to improve the family's future.

Participant 2 further explained:

"...My parents never directly forced me, but every sacrifice they made reminded me that I had to repay them someday. It felt like I had already accepted that responsibility long before I understood what it really meant..." (P2)

From a phenomenological perspective, participants did not merely describe growing up in economically disadvantaged families; rather, they described the gradual construction of meaning in which financial hardship became intertwined with their personal identities. The family environment functioned as the primary context through which participants learned to associate love, sacrifice, and educational achievement with future economic responsibility. Consequently, parental aspirations were experienced not simply as encouragement but as moral expectations that became internalized over time. The participants' narratives suggest that economic hardship served as the psychological foundation for later experiences of obligation, identity conflict, and emotional burden. Thus, the family's socioeconomic background was not merely an objective condition but a lived reality that profoundly shaped participants' understanding of themselves and their future roles within the family.

Theme 2: Perception of Parental Economic Expectation

Both participants described growing up in family environments where educational achievement and future occupational success were consistently associated with the family's economic aspirations.

Over time, these expectations became internalized and were perceived as personal obligations rather than external demands.

Participant 1 reflected:

"...Since I was in junior high school, my parents often said that I was the family's hope. At first, I thought it was encouragement, but later I realized that my success was expected to change our family's economic situation..."

Similarly, Participant 2 stated:

"...Whenever my parents talked about the future, they always linked it to my education and career. I felt that my achievements belonged not only to me but to the whole family..."

The participants' narratives illustrate that familial economic expectations were not experienced as explicit demands but as gradually internalized psychological obligations that shaped their developing identities. Throughout adolescence, repeated parental messages linking educational achievement to the family's future economic well-being transformed academic success into a moral responsibility rather than an individual aspiration. This process reflects how family expectations became embedded within participants' self-understanding, leading them to perceive personal accomplishments as collective family achievements rather than expressions of individual competence.

From a phenomenological perspective, participants experienced a shift in the meaning of success. Educational attainment and career achievement were no longer interpreted as opportunities for self-development but as symbolic commitments to repay parental sacrifices and fulfill intergenerational expectations. Consequently, participants' identities became organized around the anticipation of future responsibility, creating an enduring psychological orientation toward obligation. Their narratives suggest that the self was constructed not primarily through personal desires but through the perceived needs and aspirations of the family. This internalization marked the beginning of a developmental process in which individual identity became increasingly inseparable from the role of future economic provider.

Theme 3: Experiences of being Viewed as Future Economic Providers

A recurring theme among both participants was the experience of sacrificing personal desires to meet family expectations. Participants described feeling constrained when making educational, occupational, and life decisions.

Participant 2 explained:

"...There were things I wanted to do, but I often felt guilty choosing something that might disappoint my family. Sometimes it felt like my future had already been planned before I could decide for myself..."

Likewise, Participant 1 reported:

"...I wanted to pursue a different career path, but I chose a more stable job because I knew my family depended on me. It wasn't really my dream, but it seemed like the safest choice..."

The participants' accounts reveal that the experience of restricted autonomy extended beyond limitations in decision-making and became a fundamental aspect of their psychological development. Rather than freely exploring personal interests and life aspirations, participants described making educational and occupational choices through the lens of anticipated family expectations and economic responsibilities. Feelings of guilt emerged whenever personal preferences appeared to

conflict with the perceived needs of the family, suggesting that autonomy was negotiated within a moral framework of obligation rather than individual choice.

Both participants described becoming aware, from an early age, that they were expected to assume the role of future economic providers for their families. Although these expectations were rarely communicated as direct demands, they were consistently reinforced through everyday conversations about financial hardship, parental sacrifices, and hopes for a better future. As participants entered adolescence and early adulthood, they increasingly perceived that their educational and career achievements were valued primarily because of their anticipated contribution to the family's financial stability.

Participant 1 recalled:

"...My parents often said that everything they did was for my education because one day I would be able to lift the family out of hardship. Hearing those words repeatedly made me feel that my future no longer belonged only to me..." (P1)

Participant 2 shared a similar experience:

"...After I graduated from university, my relatives kept asking when I would start helping my parents financially. It felt as if everyone had already assumed that my main responsibility was to support the family before building my own life..." (P2)

Participant 1 further reflected:

"...When I received my first salary, I didn't think about buying something for myself. My first thought was how much I should give to my parents because I believed that was what they had been waiting for..." (P1)

The participants' narratives suggest that being viewed as future economic providers was experienced as a gradual process of identity construction rather than an isolated family expectation. Through repeated messages emphasizing parental sacrifice and future reciprocity, participants came to understand their personal achievements as obligations directed toward the collective welfare of the family. From a phenomenological perspective, the anticipated role of economic provider became incorporated into participants' sense of self, shaping how they interpreted success, responsibility, and adulthood. Rather than experiencing adulthood primarily as a period of personal independence, participants perceived it as the beginning of an expected moral commitment to repay their family's sacrifices. Consequently, economic responsibility became embedded within their identity, generating a persistent awareness that their personal future was inseparable from the family's economic expectations. This lived experience reflects how familial meanings surrounding responsibility and reciprocity gradually transformed into enduring psychological commitments that influenced participants' decisions, emotions, and self-perception.

Theme 4: Emotional Response

Both participants described experiencing complex emotional reactions as they gradually recognized the expectations placed upon them as future economic providers. Rather than identifying a single dominant emotion, they reported an ongoing coexistence of anxiety, guilt, fear, emotional exhaustion, and occasional resentment. These emotions emerged not only in response to financial responsibilities but also from the perceived obligation to fulfill their family's hopes without disappointing those who had sacrificed for them. Although both participants expressed deep affection for their parents, they acknowledged that these expectations often generated persistent psychological pressure.

Participant 1 reflected:

"...Every time my parents talked about how much they had sacrificed for my education, I felt both grateful and anxious. I was afraid that if I failed, all of their sacrifices would become meaningless. Sometimes I couldn't sleep because I kept thinking about whether I would be able to meet their expectations..." (P1)

Participant 2 described a similar emotional struggle:

"...I rarely talked about how overwhelmed I felt because I didn't want my parents to think I was ungrateful. I kept telling myself to stay strong, but inside I often felt exhausted. There were moments when I wished I could live my own life without constantly thinking about everyone else's expectations..." (P2)

Participant 2 further explained:

"...Whenever I spent money on myself, I immediately felt guilty. I always wondered whether I should have saved it for my parents instead. Even simple decisions made me feel conflicted..." (P2)

Participant 1 added:

"...People often congratulated me for being successful, but they never realized how much fear I carried. I wasn't afraid of hard work—I was afraid of becoming a disappointment..." (P1)

The participants' narratives reveal that their emotional experiences were characterized by a persistent state of psychological ambivalence in which gratitude, affection, fear, guilt, and emotional exhaustion coexisted. From a phenomenological perspective, these emotions were not isolated reactions to specific events but constituted an enduring emotional atmosphere through which participants interpreted their everyday lives. Anxiety was primarily associated with the anticipation of failing to fulfill familial expectations, whereas guilt emerged whenever participants prioritized their own needs over those of the family. Emotional exhaustion developed gradually as participants continuously monitored their decisions in relation to their perceived responsibilities, creating a constant sense of psychological vigilance.

Notably, participants did not interpret these emotions as evidence of rejecting their families; instead, they understood them as the emotional consequences of deeply internalized obligations rooted in love, reciprocity, and parental sacrifice. The lived experience therefore reflects an emotional paradox in which strong family attachment simultaneously served as a source of psychological security and emotional burden. This paradox contributed to what may be understood as invisible grief—a quiet mourning for personal freedom, unrealized aspirations, and aspects of the self that were repeatedly subordinated to the family's economic expectations. The findings suggest that emotional responses to familial economic expectations are best understood not as transient feelings but as enduring psychological processes that shape identity, meaning-making, and emotional well-being throughout the transition to adulthood.

Theme 5: Conflicts between Personal Aspirations and Family Obligations

Despite describing emotional distress, both participants simultaneously expressed gratitude, affection, and commitment toward their families. This resulted in feelings of ambivalence, where love and burden coexisted.

Participant 2 noted:

"...I love my parents, and I know they sacrificed a lot for me. That is why I feel responsible. But sometimes responsibility feels very heavy..."

Participant 1 similarly stated:

"...I don't blame my parents. They wanted a better life for all of us. Still, there were moments when I felt overwhelmed by the expectations..."

The participants' narratives demonstrate that conflicts between personal aspirations and family obligations were experienced not as a simple choice between individual and collective interests, but as an ongoing psychological negotiation that shaped their sense of self. Rather than rejecting their families' expectations, both participants described a profound emotional attachment to their parents and acknowledged the sacrifices that had enabled their educational and personal development. This emotional bond intensified their sense of responsibility, making it difficult to distinguish between actions driven by genuine personal aspirations and those motivated by internalized familial obligations. Consequently, participants experienced a persistent conflict in which pursuing personal goals often evoked guilt, while prioritizing family needs required continual postponement of their own aspirations.

From a phenomenological perspective, this conflict reflects a lived experience of emotional ambivalence in which love and burden coexist as inseparable dimensions of the parent–child relationship. Family obligations were not perceived as external pressures imposed by parents but as deeply internalized moral commitments that participants willingly embraced despite the emotional costs involved. Their narratives suggest that responsibility became an essential component of their personal identity, resulting in a paradoxical experience in which fulfilling family expectations generated both psychological meaning and emotional exhaustion.

The participants did not perceive themselves as victims of parental expectations; instead, they struggled to reconcile their desire for self-determination with their commitment to honoring parental sacrifices. This tension reveals that the psychological burden stemmed less from the expectations themselves than from the participants' ongoing effort to preserve both their personal identity and their emotional connection with their families. Ultimately, the lived experience of conflicting aspirations and obligations illustrates how familial love may simultaneously function as a source of emotional strength and a context in which individuals experience invisible grief through the gradual sacrifice of personal dreams and alternative life possibilities.

Theme 6: The Meaning Attached to these Experiences

As participants reflected on their life experiences, they described that being viewed as future economic providers gradually became more than a family expectation; it evolved into a defining aspect of how they understood themselves and their place within the family. Although both participants acknowledged the emotional burden associated with these expectations, they also interpreted their roles as expressions of love, reciprocity, and responsibility. Over time, the experience of carrying the family's hopes shaped their personal values, life priorities, and understanding of adulthood.

Participant 1 reflected:

"...For a long time, I thought my worth depended on how much I could give back to my parents. I believed that becoming successful wasn't just my dream—it was proof that their sacrifices had meaning. Looking back now, I realize that this expectation shaped almost every important decision I made..." (P1)

Participant 2 expressed a similar perspective:

"...There were times when I wished I could live only for myself, but I never stopped believing that helping my family was part of who I am. Even though it was exhausting, it gave my life a sense of purpose because I knew my parents depended on me..." (P2)

Participant 1 further explained:

"...I don't see my experiences as something entirely negative. They made me stronger and taught me responsibility. But sometimes I wonder whether I became responsible because I truly wanted to, or because I never felt I had another choice..." (P1)

The participants' narratives reveal that the meaning attached to being perceived as a family investment was characterized by a dynamic process of meaning-making in which responsibility, personal identity, and emotional attachment became deeply interconnected. From a phenomenological perspective, participants did not simply experience economic expectations as external family demands; rather, they reconstructed these experiences into personally meaningful narratives that helped them understand who they had become. Their reflections demonstrate that responsibility was experienced simultaneously as a burden and a source of purpose, creating an existential tension between self-fulfillment and devotion to the family. Rather than completely rejecting or accepting familial expectations, participants continuously negotiated their meanings, transforming parental sacrifices into moral commitments that guided their decisions and life trajectories. Consequently, their identities were shaped by an enduring belief that personal success carried significance only when it contributed to the family's well-being.

The lived experience therefore reflects an existential paradox in which psychological burden coexisted with meaning, illustrating that suffering and purpose were not mutually exclusive but were intertwined within participants' understanding of themselves. In this sense, the essence of the phenomenon lies not merely in becoming an economic provider but in constructing a self whose value is experienced through responsibility, reciprocity, and the continuous pursuit of fulfilling familial hopes despite the accompanying emotional sacrifices.

Discussion

The present study explored the lived experiences of individuals who perceived themselves as family investments and future economic providers. The findings revealed four interconnected themes: the internalization of familial economic expectations, the loss of personal autonomy, emotional burden and invisible grief, and the ambivalent meanings of family responsibility. Collectively, these themes illustrate how economic expectations become embedded within an individual's identity and psychological development. More importantly, the findings demonstrate that being positioned as a future economic provider is not merely a socioeconomic experience but also a deeply psychological and existential phenomenon.

The first theme, internalization of familial economic expectations, indicates that participants gradually incorporated family aspirations into their self-concept. Consistent with parental investment theory, families often allocate resources to children in the hope of improving future family welfare (Lawson & Mace, 2011). However, the present findings suggest that such investments may be psychologically transformed into perceived obligations. This finding aligns with research showing that family obligation values are strongly associated with self-regulation, achievement motivation, and role responsibility among adolescents and young adults (Kim et al., 2018). Similarly, Fingerman et al. (2020) argued that intergenerational relationships frequently involve expectations of reciprocity,

particularly in collectivistic cultural contexts. The present study extends this literature by demonstrating that these expectations are not merely behavioral obligations but are often internalized as part of an individual's identity.

A particularly noteworthy finding concerns participants' experiences of restricted autonomy. Both participants reported making educational and occupational decisions based primarily on family expectations rather than personal aspirations. This finding is consistent with Self-Determination Theory, which emphasizes autonomy as a fundamental psychological need necessary for well-being and healthy development (Ryan & Deci, 2020). When autonomy is constrained by external pressures, individuals may experience psychological distress and reduced life satisfaction. Previous studies have shown that excessive family obligation may create tension between individual goals and family demands, particularly during emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2015; Kim et al., 2018). The present findings suggest that this tension may become particularly pronounced when children perceive themselves as carrying responsibility for the family's future economic security.

One of the most significant contributions of this study is the identification of what may be described as invisible grief. Although participants had not experienced death-related loss, they repeatedly described feelings of sadness, regret, and mourning for unrealized possibilities. From a psychological perspective, grief is increasingly understood as a response not only to bereavement but also to the loss of valued identities, opportunities, and anticipated futures. Participants described grieving alternative versions of themselves that could not be pursued because family responsibilities occupied a central role in their lives. This finding resonates with contemporary grief literature suggesting that individuals may experience chronic sorrow and psychological loss when important life possibilities become inaccessible (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Neimeyer et al., 2014). Thus, the burden associated with familial economic expectations may extend beyond stress and responsibility to include experiences of symbolic and existential loss.

The findings also revealed indications of relational trauma. Unlike acute traumatic events, relational trauma develops gradually through repeated interpersonal experiences that shape emotional functioning and self-perception. Participants frequently reported feeling valued primarily for their potential economic contribution to the family. Although these experiences were often conveyed through expressions of parental hope and sacrifice, participants simultaneously experienced pressure, guilt, and fear of failure. This finding is consistent with literature suggesting that parentification and excessive family responsibility may contribute to emotional burden, role confusion, and psychological distress across development (Hooper et al., 2011; Burton, 2007). While the participants did not perceive their families as intentionally harmful, their narratives indicate that prolonged exposure to economic expectations may create enduring psychological vulnerabilities.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the psychological experience of being perceived as a future family investment reflects a developmental process in which external family expectations are progressively transformed into internal standards that shape identity, emotional functioning, and interpersonal relationships. Rather than experiencing economic expectations solely as financial obligations, participants described a continuous process of negotiating personal aspirations within a relational context characterized by parental sacrifice and collective family goals. This process is consistent with research indicating that children's self-concepts are profoundly influenced by relational experiences that communicate conditions of worth and expectations of reciprocity (Roth et al., 2009).

Furthermore, the participants' narratives illustrate how prolonged exposure to family expectations may foster self-silencing and emotional suppression, increasing vulnerability to chronic psychological distress despite maintaining strong family cohesion (Jack & Ali, 2010). The coexistence of gratitude, obligation, and emotional burden also supports evidence that family relationships can simultaneously function as protective and stressful environments, particularly when role expectations become central to identity development (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). From a

developmental perspective, the findings reinforce the proposition that identity is constructed through ongoing interactions between individual agency and sociocultural expectations rather than through autonomous personal choices alone (McLean & Syed, 2015). Therefore, the present study extends existing knowledge by demonstrating that the experience of becoming a family's anticipated economic provider is fundamentally an existential and relational phenomenon in which psychological well-being is shaped by the continuous negotiation between autonomy, relatedness, and responsibility across the life course (Kagitcibasi, 2007).

Another important finding concerns emotional ambivalence. Participants expressed deep affection and gratitude toward their parents while simultaneously experiencing exhaustion and emotional strain. Similar patterns have been identified in research on intergenerational ambivalence, which demonstrates that positive and negative emotions frequently coexist within close family relationships (Pillemer et al., 2019). In collectivistic societies, familial obligations are often perceived as moral responsibilities rather than external demands (Yeh et al., 2013). Consequently, individuals may experience difficulty acknowledging feelings of burden because doing so may be interpreted as disloyalty or ingratitude toward family members. The coexistence of love and burden observed in the present study reflects the complex emotional dynamics that characterize many intergenerational relationships.

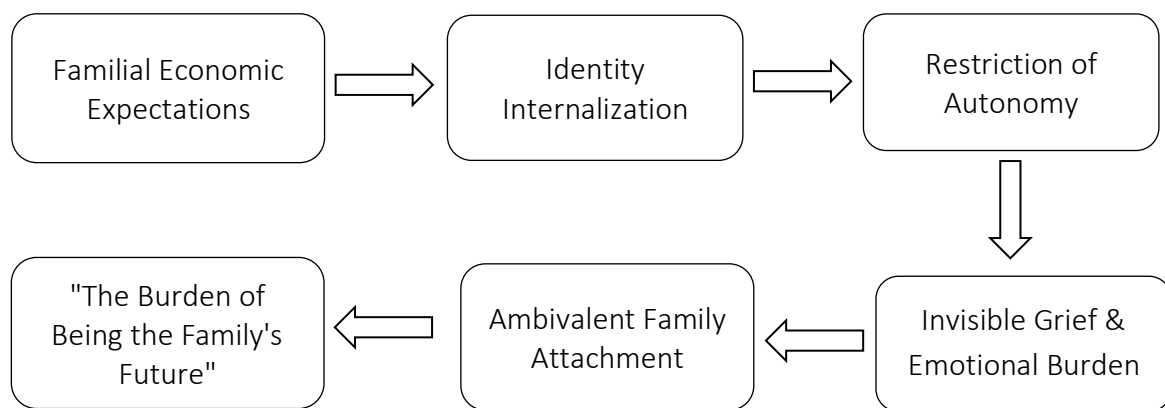


Figure 1. Thematic Analysis

The conceptual model illustrates that the lived experience of becoming a future family investment develops through a sequential psychological process rather than as an isolated response to economic hardship. The process begins with familial economic expectations, in which repeated parental messages regarding financial sacrifice and future reciprocity become embedded within children's developmental experiences. Over time, these expectations are internalized into personal identity, leading individuals to define their self-worth through their anticipated ability to improve the family's socioeconomic condition. Such internalization subsequently restricts psychological autonomy, as personal aspirations are increasingly evaluated against collective family interests rather than individual preferences. Consistent with developmental and family systems perspectives, prolonged restriction of autonomy may generate chronic emotional tension and undermine authentic identity exploration (Allen et al., 2003; Soenens et al., 2007).

As this psychological process continues, participants experience invisible grief and emotional burden, reflecting the loss of imagined life possibilities, personal freedom, and unrealized aspirations while simultaneously maintaining commitment to their families. Rather than weakening family relationships, these experiences foster ambivalent family attachment, whereby affection, gratitude, guilt, obligation, and emotional exhaustion coexist within the same relational context. This coexistence reflects the paradox of secure emotional bonds that simultaneously function as sources of psychological burden, a phenomenon commonly observed in highly interdependent family systems

(Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019). Ultimately, these interconnected experiences culminate in the burden of being the family's future, in which responsibility is no longer perceived as a temporary family role but becomes a central component of personal identity and life purpose. The model therefore suggests that familial economic expectations initiate a cumulative developmental trajectory through which external family demands are gradually transformed into enduring psychological realities that influence identity formation, emotional well-being, autonomy, and existential meaning across the transition to adulthood (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Erikson, 1968; Fivush, 2011; McAdams & McLean, 2013).

From a phenomenological perspective, the essence of participants' experiences lies in the tension between being loved and being expected. Phenomenology emphasizes the subjective meanings individuals assign to their experiences rather than objective descriptions of events (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith et al., 2022). For the participants in this study, familial economic expectations were not experienced solely as pressure or sacrifice. Instead, they were experienced as an inseparable combination of hope, obligation, affection, fear, gratitude, and loss. The participants' narratives revealed that being perceived as a family investment fundamentally shaped how they understood themselves, their future, and their relationships with significant others. The phenomenon therefore cannot be reduced to economic dependency alone; it represents a lived psychological reality that influences identity construction and meaning-making processes throughout development.

Implications and Recommendations for Further Research

The findings of this study have important theoretical, practical, and methodological implications for psychology. Theoretically, this study extends the literature on family obligation, parental investment, and intergenerational reciprocity by demonstrating that being positioned as a future economic provider may shape identity formation, emotional well-being, self-worth, and autonomy through the internalization of familial economic expectations. Practically, the findings highlight the need for parents, counselors, and mental health professionals to recognize that economic expectations, although often rooted in love and sacrifice, may contribute to invisible grief, identity conflict, chronic responsibility, emotional ambivalence, and psychological distress, thereby emphasizing the importance of fostering balanced family expectations and open communication regarding individual aspirations and family responsibilities. Methodologically, this study demonstrates the value of phenomenological inquiry for capturing the subjective meanings of familial economic expectations, revealing dimensions of psychological experience unlikely to emerge through quantitative approaches alone. Collectively, these findings provide a foundation for future research examining the long-term psychological consequences of being perceived as a family investment across diverse cultural contexts and contribute to a broader understanding of the interplay between family expectations, identity development, and psychological well-being throughout the lifespan.

Limitation

The Indonesian context provides an important backdrop for understanding these findings. Cultural values emphasizing filial piety, family loyalty, and intergenerational reciprocity may strengthen expectations that children contribute to family welfare (Yeh et al., 2013). While these values often promote family cohesion and resilience, the present findings suggest that they may also generate psychological costs when economic expectations become central to parent-child relationships. The findings therefore contribute to the growing literature on family obligation by highlighting its emotional and existential dimensions, which are often overlooked in quantitative research.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that being positioned as a future family investment and economic provider represents a multifaceted psychological phenomenon that extends beyond financial responsibility, shaping identity formation, emotional well-being, and life decision-making through the internalization of familial economic expectations. The findings demonstrate that participants experienced a persistent tension between personal aspirations and family obligations, giving rise to invisible grief characterized by the loss of perceived autonomy, unrealized life possibilities, and the continuous negotiation between self-determination and collective family expectations. Rather than viewing family responsibility as either wholly beneficial or detrimental, the study reveals that affection, gratitude, obligation, burden, and sacrifice coexist within the lived experience of parent–child relationships, reflecting the complex emotional realities of collectivistic family systems. These findings contribute to psychological theory by extending the concepts of parental investment, family obligation, and intergenerational reciprocity beyond behavioral and economic perspectives toward a deeper understanding of their emotional, existential, and developmental meanings. Future research should examine these experiences across more diverse cultural and socioeconomic contexts using broader qualitative or mixed-method approaches, while mental health professionals and family practitioners are encouraged to consider familial economic expectations as an important contextual factor when addressing identity conflict, chronic responsibility, emotional distress, and autonomy-related difficulties among adolescents and young adults.

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