The Meaning of Happiness Among Single-Parent Family Students in Secondary School: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

Happiness is a fundamental goal for every individual, including students from single-parent families who face unique psychological and social challenges. However, previous research in Indonesia has predominantly focused on the negative impacts of non-intact family structures, with limited exploration of the subjective meaning of happiness among students from single-parent families. Addressing this gap, the present study explores the meaning of happiness among junior high school students raised in single-parent families in Indonesia through a qualitative phenomenological approach. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews with two purposively selected students from MTs Ma'arif Klaten. Thematic analysis identified that student happiness is shaped by both internal factors—such as coping strategies, personal resilience, and self-acceptance—and external factors, including emotional support from family (despite its non-intact structure), positive social relationships with peers and teachers, and a supportive school environment. These findings highlight that happiness for single-parent students is a dynamic process arising from the interplay between individual psychological resources and social support, rather than being determined solely by family intactness. The study recommends that schools, teachers, and counselors strengthen social support systems and develop inclusive, responsive psychosocial interventions to enhance the psychological well-being and optimal development of students from diverse family backgrounds.

Introduction

The family plays a foundational role in the psychological, emotional, and social development of every individual (Merriam-Webster, 2025). In Indonesia, the family is traditionally defined as a unit consisting of a father, mother, and children (KBBI, 2016). For decades, the paradigm of the ideal family has emphasized the presence of both parents raising their children together, aligning with cultural and social norms that place the family as the primary environment for shaping children's character and well-being. However, socio-economic changes and shifting

societal values have transformed the meaning of the "ideal family." Today, the quality of interpersonal relationships, harmony, and emotional support among family members are considered more significant than the mere structure of the family (Embley, 2014; Vallejo-Correa et al., 2025).

This transformation is reflected in the increasing diversity of family structures in Indonesia and globally. According to data from Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS), the number of single-parent households in Indonesia continues to rise. For example, the 2022 BPS Social Welfare Survey (Susenas) estimated that approximately 15% of households in Indonesia are headed by single parents, either due to divorce, death of a spouse, or other causes (BPS, 2022). This trend raises critical questions regarding the developmental and psychological consequences for children who grow up outside traditional two-parent households.

Empirical studies have shown that children in single-parent families often face complex challenges, such as limited economic resources, less emotional support, and higher risks for mental health issues compared to children from intact families (Bhandari & Gupta, 2024; Brand & Thomas, 2014; Låftman, 2010). These challenges can affect educational opportunities, nutrition, health, and may limit the parent's ability to provide optimal attention and emotional support (Chang et al., 2024; Kleinschlömer & Krapf, 2023).

Despite these challenges, the negative effects of single-parent families are not deterministic. Children's psychological well-being subjective well-being (SWB) is dynamic and strongly influenced by the quality of family relationships, social support, and functioning support systems (Sun & Li, 2002; Vallejo-Correa et al., 2025). However, previous studies have predominantly focused on objective aspects such as academic achievement or economic status, with limited research exploring the subjective meaning of happiness among single-parent students in Indonesian secondary schools. This gap is critical, given the growing number of children living in single-parent households and the importance of understanding their lived experiences of happiness and well-being.

Based on the gap identified, this study addresses the following research question: How do single-parent students in Indonesian junior high schools construct and experience happiness in their daily lives? To address this problem, this research adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach. This method allows for in-depth exploration of the subjective meanings, personal narratives, and psychological dynamics that shape students' happiness within single-parent families. The objectives of this research are to: (1) explore the subjective meaning of happiness among single-parent junior high school students in Indonesia, and

(2) identify and analyze the key internal and external factors that shape the subjective well-being of these students in the context of single-parenting.

The theoretical framework is based on the concept of subjective well-being (Myers & Diener, 1995), which highlights life satisfaction, positive emotions, and self-acceptance as the core components of happiness. In single-parent families, both internal factors (resilience, coping strategies, sense of belonging) and external factors (family communication, social support, and economic stability) are crucial determinants of children's well-being (Chang et al., 2024; Nahkur & Kutsar, 2022; Sugiyo Pranoto & Hong, 2020). Family structure theory asserts that while structural differences influence development, their impact is mediated by the quality of parent-child relationships and emotional involvement (Brand & Thomas, 2014; Kleinschlömer & Krapf, 2023). Bronfenbrenner's ecological model further emphasizes the role of microenvironments such as school and community, with teacher and peer support strengthening resilience and subjective well-being (Pandya, 2023; Pannilage, 2017; Vallejo-Correa et al., 2025).

Method

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method. The phenomenological design was selected over other qualitative approaches—such as grounded theory, case study, or ethnography—because phenomenology specifically aims to uncover the essence and subjective meaning of lived experiences as perceived by participants themselves, rather than developing a theory (grounded theory), exploring a single case in depth (case study), or analyzing cultural phenomena (ethnography) (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This approach is considered the most appropriate for understanding the complex, personal, and deeply meaningful experiences related to happiness among students from single-parent families.

Regarding sample size, phenomenological studies prioritize the depth and richness of individual experiences rather than the number of participants. According to leading methodological references (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2018), a small number of participants (typically ranging from 2 to 10) is sufficient and even preferred in phenomenology, as it allows for intensive, detailed analysis of each participant's narrative. In this study, two participants were purposively selected to provide rich, contrasting accounts of the subjective meaning of happiness within the context of single-parent families, enabling a focused exploration of the phenomenon without being diluted by an excessive breadth of data. This aligns with the phenomenological aim to achieve depth of understanding and capture the essence of lived experience

Setting and Participants

The research was conducted at MTs Ma'arif Klaten, a junior high school in Klaten Regency, Central Java. This school was purposively selected because it has a student population with diverse family backgrounds, including students from single-parent families, making it representative for examining the dynamics of happiness in the context of local social and cultural conditions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research participants consisted of students in grades VII to IX who came from single-parent families, either due to divorce or the death of a parent. The inclusion criteria were: (1) students actively enrolled at MTs Ma'arif Klaten, (2) living with one parent for at least the past two years, and (3) willing to participate voluntarily. The recruitment process was conducted after obtaining permission from the school and consent from the participants and their parents/guardians.

To ensure the credibility and accuracy of the data, a member checking process was conducted after interview transcription and initial data analysis. The researcher met individually with each participant, presenting them with summaries and key interpretations of their interview data. Participants were asked to review these summaries, provide feedback, and clarify any statements or experiences they felt were misrepresented or incomplete. Both participants confirmed that the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences and meanings regarding happiness. No significant corrections or disagreements were raised, indicating a high level of trustworthiness and validation of the research findings.

Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

Data was collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews using interview guidelines developed based on the theories of subjective well-being and sense of belonging. These guidelines included open-ended questions aimed at exploring the experiences, meanings of happiness, challenges faced, and coping strategies of single-parent students, such as: "What does happiness mean to you?", "What are the things that make you happy?", "What is your experience as a child from a single-parent family?", and "How do you cope with the challenges that arise?" In addition to interviews, observations of the school environment and students' social interactions were conducted to enrich the data. Each interview was recorded (with participant consent) to ensure data accuracy and then transcribed verbatim.

Research Ethics Procedures

All research procedures followed the principles of social research ethics. The researchers obtained official permission from the school. Informed consent was

obtained in writing and verbally from participants and/or parents/guardians after they received an explanation of the objectives, benefits, rights of participants, and guarantees of personal data confidentiality. Participants were given the full right to withdraw at any time without consequences. All identities and sensitive information were kept confidential, and data was used solely for academic and scientific purposes (Wiles, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted using open coding, axial coding, and selective coding techniques in accordance with the Strauss and Corbin (1998) model to identify the main themes and essence of student happiness. The analysis process included transcribing interviews, repeated readings, data coding, theme grouping, and drawing conclusions. Data validity was ensured through member checking, which involves confirming the interpretation results with participants, and peer debriefing, which involves discussing the findings with colleagues, to ensure the credibility and validity of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The entire analysis process was conducted manually, emphasizing the integrity and authenticity of the students' subjective experiences.

Results and Discussion

This study involved two seventh-grade students at MTs Ma'arif Klaten who came from single-parent families with distinct socioeconomic and relational backgrounds.

HLP is a 14-year-old girl who lives with her grandmother and older brother after her father passed away and her mother remarried and moved away. Economically, her family faces significant financial constraints; daily needs are primarily supported by her grandmother. HLP's relationship with her mother is distant due to infrequent communication, while she feels closer to her grandmother and brother. Academically, HLP is an average student but has experienced a decline in performance, which has negatively impacted her emotional well-being. She often feels unloved and lonely.

CFA is a 14-year-old boy who lives with his father after his parents divorced. His economic background is lower-middle class, with his father as the sole breadwinner. CFA rarely sees his mother, although they occasionally communicate via phone. He maintains a good relationship with his father and has a strong yearning for his mother's presence. Academically, CFA achieves average grades, but he is active in extracurricular activities and has a large circle of close friends at school. He still hopes his parents will reconcile. The variation in

participants' backgrounds provides a rich and contrasting illustration of the subjective experiences of single-parent children in secondary school.

Theme 1: The Subjective Meaning of Happiness

Data analysis shows that happiness for single-parent students is highly subjective, shaped by daily experiences, social relationships, and personal expectations.

HLP defines happiness as feelings of comfort and pleasure in daily activities, such as studying, talking to favorite teachers, reading comics, and watching movies. She emphasizes the importance of accepting circumstances and not feeling envious of others.

"In my opinion, happiness is when I feel happy and comfortable." (HLP)

"There are many lessons, such as not being selfish and being patient, as well as not being easily jealous." (HLP)

CFA defines happiness through social relationships, particularly togetherness with friends and family, and especially when his mother comes home.

"I am happy when I can play with my friends, and also at home when my mother comes home." (CFA)

"I still want my father and mother to be together again..." (CFA)

Theme 2: Sources of Happiness and Social Support

Both participants identify social support as fundamental to their happiness.

HLP feels less accepted by her peers and is more comfortable befriending older students.

"Talking with friends is a bit tedious because some of them pretend to like me, when in fact they don't." (HLP)

CFA has close social relationships with classmates and frequently participates in group activities.

"A lot, ma'am, we often play games and ride motorcycles together." (CFA)

Family support is also significant; CFA receives attention from his mother even though they live apart.

"Usually I am asked if I have eaten yet, sometimes I am given pocket money." (CFA)

Theme 3: Emotional Challenges and Coping Strategies

Both participants face considerable emotional challenges.

HLP often feels lonely, neglected, and has experienced physical abuse due to academic decline.

"My bad experience was in fifth or sixth grade, when I was beaten with a broom until it almost broke because my grades had dropped." (HLP)

CFA experiences sadness and cries when leaving his mother.

"Sometimes when I come home from my mother's house, I cry on the way." (CFA)

Coping strategies include drawing, writing, sleeping (HLP), and seeking support from friends and staying active (CFA).

"When I feel sad or angry, I usually doodle in my sketchbook to feel better, or I sleep." (HLP)

"I entertain myself, invite others to play or go out so I don't feel sad." (CFA)

Theme 4: Gratitude and Self-Motivation

Both participants strive to be grateful and self-motivated despite challenges.

"I am grateful that my father and mother still love me." (CFA)

"I thought that it was useless to continue feeling down, so I slowly began to pick myself up." (HLP)

This study aims to reveal the meaning of happiness among single-parent students in secondary schools using a phenomenological approach. The results of this study highlight several key themes related to the meaning of happiness, sources of support, emotional challenges, coping strategies, as well as the meaning of gratitude and self-motivation, all of which contribute to the subjective well-being of single-parent students in Indonesia.

1. Happiness as a Subjective and Contextual Experience

One of the key findings of this study is that happiness among single-parent students is highly subjective and contextual. Each participant interprets happiness based on their personal experiences, family circumstances, and social relationships. HLP, for example, defines happiness as feeling comfortable and joyful while engaging in simple daily activities, such as studying, talking with a favorite teacher, or enjoying hobbies like reading and watching movies. Accepting one's circumstances and not envying others are also important aspects of HLP's version of happiness. In contrast, CFA finds happiness in spending time with friends and moments when her mother returns home, as well as in the hope that her family can reunite.

These findings support the concept of subjective well-being (Myers & Diener, 1995), which emphasizes that happiness is the result of an individual's subjective assessment of their life, including life satisfaction, positive emotions, and acceptance of oneself and one's environment. Seligman (2002) also asserts that meaning in life and engagement in meaningful activities are predictors of

lasting happiness. In the context of single-parent students in Indonesia, the results of this study indicate that simple activities, self-acceptance, and positive social relationships are key factors in shaping subjective well-being. This underscores the importance of a phenomenological approach in understanding happiness, as only through personal narratives and subjective experiences can the authentic meaning of happiness be revealed (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

2. Sources of Happiness: Social Relationships and Family Support

The results of this study also indicate that social relationships and family support are the primary sources of happiness for single-parent students. For HLP, limitations in forming relationships with peers led him to prefer befriending older students. Meanwhile, CFA felt happy because he had many close friends who were always together, both at school and outside of school. This strong social network has been proven to enhance subjective well-being and a sense of belonging, as emphasized by Vallejo-Correa et al. (2025) and Nahkur & Kutsar (2022) in the context of children from single-parent families across various countries. Låftman's (2010) findings also show that limited access to social networks can increase the risk of loneliness and a decline in the psychological well-being of children from broken families.

In addition to peers, family support remains very important, albeit in a different form. CFA continues to receive attention from his mother even though they live apart, such as being given pocket money and asked how he is doing, which helps him feel loved and cared for. Brand & Thomas (2014) and Bachman et al. (2009) emphasize that a parent's emotional presence, even if not physically present, plays a crucial role in supporting a child's resilience and happiness. Conversely, HLP who feel they receive less affection from their mothers are more prone to feelings of loneliness and withdrawal. This reinforces the argument of Bhandari & Gupta (2024) and Kleinschlömer & Krapf (2023) that the quality of the parent-child relationship is more important than the formal structure of the family.

3. Emotional Challenges and the Impact of Family Structure

Single-parent students in this study faced various emotional challenges, ranging from feelings of loneliness and loss of parental figures to experiences of physical violence due to declining academic performance. HLP admitted to often feeling lonely and even experiencing physical violence from family members due to declining academic performance. Meanwhile, CFA felt sad and cried every time she had to part with her mother, and placed great hope in the possibility of her

family being reunited. These findings are consistent with the research results of Damota (2019), Chavda & Nisarga (2023), and Kleinschlömer & Krapf (2023), which indicate that children from single-parent families are more vulnerable to emotional pressure, stress, internal conflicts, and long-term psychological impacts resulting from separation or the loss of a parent.

The impact of changes in family structure on subjective well-being has also been widely documented in international literature (Sun & Li, 2002; Jeynes, 2006). Låftman (2010) even found that differences in family structure correlate with limited resources, mental health risks, and a decline in children's psychological well-being. However, the results of this study emphasize that these negative effects are not deterministic, but rather highly dependent on the quality of social relationships, family warmth, and the availability of emotional support.

4. Coping Strategies: Adaptation, Resilience, and Emotional Expression

One interesting finding is how single-parent students develop coping strategies to deal with emotional pressures and life challenges. For example, HLP channels negative emotions by drawing, writing stories, and sleeping. These strategies help her calm herself and reduce psychological distress. CFA prefers to maintain enthusiasm by seeking support from friends and diverting attention to positive activities. These coping strategies are in line with the findings of Pandya (2023) and Sugiyo Pranoto & Hong (2020), who emphasize the importance of adaptive coping skills and resilience in maintaining the happiness of single-parent children.

Chang et al. (2024) highlight that involvement in social activities, coping skills training, and the presence of peer support groups serve as key psychosocial protectors for adolescents in non-intact families. This study also demonstrates that positive coping strategies can reduce the negative impacts of family structure changes, enhance a sense of belonging, and build self-motivation to face life's challenges (Masten, 2014; Lee, 2021).

5. Gratitude, Self-Motivation, and the Meaning of Happiness

Both participants in this study demonstrated efforts to be grateful and to motivate themselves to endure and grow within challenging family circumstances. They tried to accept reality, avoid prolonged regret, and foster hope and optimism. This finding is consistent with the study by Lee (2021), which shows that gratitude and self-motivation make a significant contribution to adolescents' subjective well-being. Myers & Diener (1995) also emphasize that self-acceptance,

optimism, and gratitude are key predictors of happiness in children and adolescents across various countries.

The meaning of happiness revealed in this study also reinforces the theory of positive psychology (Seligman, 2002), which highlights the importance of meaning, positive relationships, engagement, and achievement as the main elements of happiness. In the context of single-parent children in Indonesia, aspects of meaning and gratitude are often linked to local cultural values such as gotong royong (mutual cooperation) and social solidarity in the school and family environment (Sugiyo Pranoto & Hong, 2020), further enriching the narrative of happiness among children from non-intact families.

The discussion of the research findings consistently strengthens the notion that the happiness of single-parent children is the result of complex interactions among the individual, family, school, and community (Myers & Diener, 1995; Vallejo-Correa et al., 2025; Chavda & Nisarga, 2023; Brand & Thomas, 2014). This study also supports the literature that, while family structure does influence the risk of psychological well-being, mediating factors such as the quality of parent-child relationships, sense of belonging, coping skills, and social support are far more decisive (Bachman et al., 2009; Jeynes, 2006; Nahkur & Kutsar, 2022).

The presence of teachers, counselors, and inclusive school programs is crucial, as highlighted by Chang et al. (2024) and Pannilage (2017), in creating a supportive environment for single-parent students. CFA, who had a strong social network at school, exhibited better subjective well-being, whereas HLP, who felt socially isolated, was more prone to withdrawal. This underscores the importance of school intervention programs such as peer support groups, counseling, coping skills training, and extracurricular activities that foster social participation and a sense of belonging (Brand & Thomas, 2014; Bachman et al., 2009; Bhandari & Gupta, 2024).

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the number of participants was limited to two students from only one school in Central Java, so the results cannot be generalized to the entire population of single-parent children in Indonesia. Second, the data obtained are highly subjective and closely related to the psychological state of the participants at the time of the interview, so potential bias cannot be avoided. Third, data triangulation with teachers or parents was not conducted, even though this is important to strengthen the validity of the findings and reduce interpretive bias.

Another limitation is the highly specific local context. Nevertheless, the in-depth narratives obtained provide an important contribution to understanding the subjective process of happiness formation among single-parent children in

Indonesia. For future research, it is recommended to involve more participants from diverse social, economic, religious, and educational backgrounds, as well as to use a mixed-methods approach for a more comprehensive understanding (Bhandari & Gupta, 2024; Brand & Thomas, 2014). Future studies should also include the perspectives of teachers, parents, and peers, and further explore the role of school policies and community support in enhancing the well-being of children from single-parent families (Kleinschlömer & Krapf, 2023; Vallejo-Correa et al., 2025).

Practically, the findings of this study emphasize that schools, teachers, counselors, and the social environment play a key role in supporting the happiness of single-parent students (Pannilage, 2017; Chang et al., 2024; Vallejo-Correa et al., 2025). The implementation of intervention programs such as peer support groups, individual counseling, coping skills training, and extracurricular activities that foster a sense of belonging is highly recommended. In addition, it is necessary to provide training for teachers to increase their sensitivity to the special needs of single-parent students, as well as collaboration between schools, families, and communities as outlined by Bachman et al. (2009) and Brand & Thomas (2014).

Inclusive school policies are also essential, including providing access to counseling services, coping skills training, and strengthening parental involvement even if parents do not live together—through regular communication and collaboration with the school (Chang et al., 2024; Vallejo-Correa et al., 2025). At the level of national education policy, evidence-based intervention strategies are needed to support the resilience, mental health, and happiness of children from various family structures (Bhandari & Gupta, 2024).

Theoretically, the findings of this study enrich the literature on positive psychology, child development, and resilience by showing that the happiness of single-parent children is not solely determined by family structure, but is greatly influenced by the quality of social relationships, coping, resilience, and self-acceptance (Seligman, 2002; Masten, 2014). The phenomenological approach has proven effective in uncovering the subjective narratives and authentic experiences of children's happiness, which are often overlooked in quantitative studies.

This study challenges the old narrative that children from single-parent families always experience diminished well-being. With positive coping strategies and adequate social support, they are able to build happiness and self-motivation. Thus, theories on family structure and child well-being need to be adapted to be more sensitive to the contextual, cultural, and psychological factors that shape

children's happiness outside the nuclear family (Chavda & Nisarga, 2023; Kleinschlömer & Krapf, 2023; Brand & Thomas, 2014).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the meaning of happiness for junior high school students from single-parent families is not determined by the intactness of family structure but rather grows from the individual's ability to create meaning in life, establish positive social relationships, and develop adaptive coping strategies. Happiness for single-parent students is achieved through self-acceptance, social support from peers and teachers, and psychological resilience in facing life's challenges.

Practically, the findings of this study underscore the importance of the roles of schools, teachers, and the social environment in creating a safe, supportive, and inclusive space to foster the psychological well-being of single-parent students. A needs-based approach and responsive psychosocial interventions are required to ensure that every child, regardless of family background, has equal opportunities to grow and experience authentic happiness.

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