

Understanding Fathers' Loneliness in Relation to Psychological and Social Factors

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Abstract

Loneliness in fathers is a relevant psychological issue but remains understudied. Most research on loneliness focuses on the elderly, mothers, or adolescents, while fathers are often overlooked. However, changes in roles after becoming a father may also place men at risk of loneliness. This study examines paternal loneliness from the perspectives of parenting self-efficacy, job stress, marital satisfaction, and sense of community, with meaning in life as a moderator. A quantitative research design with a PLS-SEM approach was used. The participants were 256 married fathers who lived with their spouses and had children no older than 5 years. Data were collected using self-report questionnaires in a cross-sectional design. The results revealed that meaning in life moderated the effects of parenting self-efficacy and sense of community on loneliness, but not the effect of job stress. Job stress had a direct impact on loneliness, while marital satisfaction showed no significant relationship with either meaning in life or loneliness. These findings highlight meaning in life as a protective factor against loneliness in fathers.

Keywords: fathers' loneliness, meaning in life, parental self-efficacy, job stress, sense of community, Indonesia

Abstrak

Kesepian pada ayah adalah masalah psikologis yang relevan tetapi tetap kurang dipelajari. Sebagian besar penelitian tentang kesepian berfokus pada orang tua, ibu, atau remaja, sementara ayah sering diabaikan. Namun, perubahan peran setelah menjadi seorang ayah juga dapat menempatkan pria pada risiko kesepian. Penelitian ini mengkaji kesepian ayah dari perspektif self-efficacy parenting, stres kerja, kepuasan perkawinan, dan rasa kebersamaan, dengan makna hidup sebagai moderator. Desain penelitian kuantitatif dengan pendekatan PLS-SEM digunakan. Para peserta adalah 256 ayah yang sudah menikah yang tinggal bersama pasangan mereka dan memiliki anak tidak lebih dari 5 tahun. Data dikumpulkan menggunakan kuesioner laporan mandiri dalam desain cross-sectional. Hasilnya mengungkapkan bahwa makna hidup memoderasi efek efikasi diri pengasuhan dan rasa kebersamaan pada kesepian, tetapi bukan efek stres kerja. Stres kerja berdampak langsung pada kesepian, sementara kepuasan pernikahan tidak menunjukkan hubungan yang signifikan dengan makna hidup atau kesepian. Temuan ini menyoroti makna hidup sebagai faktor pelindung terhadap kesepian pada ayah.

Kata kunci: kesepian ayah, makna hidup, efikasi diri orang tua, stres kerja, rasa kebersamaan, indonesia

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INTRODUCTION

Loneliness is an unpleasant subjective experience that occurs when a person feels lacking, either in quantity or quality, in their social relationships. In general, it indicates a gap between idealized relationships and the actual relationships a person experiences (Roberts & Krueger, 2020). Currently, loneliness is a global phenomenon (Taylor et al., 2023). Surkalim et al. (2022) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis covering 113 countries in the world and found that loneliness in the adult context is between 9.2 to 14.4 percent. This figure deserves special attention given the significant impact of loneliness.

Previous research has consistently suggested that long-term loneliness can impact a person's physical and mental health. A literature review of 16 longitudinal studies suggests that loneliness can increase the risk of incident coronary heart disease (CHD) by 29 percent and stroke risk by 32 percent (Taylor et al., 2023). Loneliness can be understood as a biopsychosocial stressor and a risk factor for morbidity and mortality (Cacioppo et al., 2015). A meta-analysis found that individuals with adequate social relationships had a higher survival rate than those who were lonely (Harris, 2023). Not only does loneliness have physical and mental impacts, but it is also associated with decreased cognitive function. Loneliness is directly linked to dementia in the elderly (Guarnera et al, 2023; Karska et al., 2023; Sutin et al., 2018) and to lower IQ (Guarnera, Yuen, & Macpherson, 2023; Karska et al., 2023; Sutin et al., 2018). Loneliness is also strongly associated with the onset of depression (Erzen & Çikrikci, 2018).

Research on loneliness has so far focused more on university students and the elderly, while studies highlighting the experience of loneliness in parents, especially fathers, are still lacking. A systematic literature review by Nowland et al. (2021) on loneliness in parents found that, of 187 articles, only 3 specifically discussed loneliness in fathers. Approximately 10% of new fathers experience mental health difficulties, including depression and anxiety, during the perinatal period (Singley & Edwards, 2015). Concepts of masculinity often limit fathers' access to mental health services, even though they also experience negative psychological changes during the postpartum period. Junttila et al. (2015) said that fathers' loneliness increased in the pregnancy, infancy, and childhood phases, especially when they had a history of loneliness before these phases. According to Philpott et al. (2017), mental stress experienced by expectant fathers is caused by negative feelings towards pregnancy, changes in freedom and demands of the role of father, concerns regarding the birthing process, and a lack of confidence in caring for the baby.

In the cultural context, contemporary masculinities among young men in Indonesia reflect complex negotiations between traditional values, global influences, and socioeconomic pressures. Research identifies multiple masculine identities that challenge traditional patriarchal models while maintaining hegemonic structures (Buschmeyer & Lengersdorf, 2016). The problem is that research consistently demonstrates that traditional masculinity norms create significant barriers to men's emotional expression, with serious psychological and behavioral consequences. Men exhibit lower help-seeking rates for emotional problems, particularly depression, due to traditional masculine norms that inhibit emotional expressiveness and symptom perception (Seidler et al., 2016). Systematic reviews confirm that conformity to masculine norms impacts men's symptom expression, help-seeking attitudes, and symptom management for depression (Seidler et al., 2016). The prevailing social construction contributes to the marginalization of fathers' mental health issues. In the context of this study, paternal loneliness has rarely been



addressed not because such experiences are absent among fathers, but because they have not received adequate scholarly or societal attention. This underscores the necessity of a more in-depth investigation, especially in the Indonesian context.

Factors that cause loneliness have been studied for a long time. Early research on loneliness tended to focus on persistent internal factors, such as personality traits and characteristics, and later expanded to include cognitive construction factors (Paredes et al., 2020). Along with these developments, individuals' construction of meaning in life became a significant factor in determining their experience of loneliness (Çağış et al., 2023; Macià et al., 2021). Meaning in life can be defined as a person's capacity to give value and importance to their life (Martela & Steger, 2016). A person with meaning in life will be better able to regulate loneliness by reducing negative emotions (Çağış et al., 2023). Meaning in life also fosters a sense of hope, helping prevent loneliness (Einav & Margalit, 2020). In this study, the meaning of life is used as a mediator variable.

King & Hicks (2021) argue that several factors can indicate the meaningfulness of one's life, namely positive affect, social connection, religion, self, mental time travel, and mortality awareness. In this study, the factors reviewed to predict the meaning in life are, first, positive affect, which is described as feelings of pleasure, cheerfulness, enjoyment, and fun. Positive affect allows a person to see the "big picture" in their life, which can increase the meaning of their experiences. Second, social connection is when a person is recognized for their existence in this world. In addition, as social beings, a sense of security will be built when they feel connected to each other. Third, the self encompasses aspects such as self-awareness, an understanding of life's purpose, and consistency between personal values and actions. One of the focuses of the self-factor is when a person feels in control of their life. People who feel able to make decisions and control their lives tend to find meaning in life more easily than those who feel their lives are determined by external factors. In this study, meaning in life is examined through several main factors: marital satisfaction and sense of community, which represent social connection; fathering self-efficacy as part of the self; and job stress, which is also related to positive affect.

Several studies have revealed challenges faced by fathers after having a child. Ermer & Proulx (2019) noted that the husband's social environment tends to be smaller than his wife's, so the possibility of a husband experiencing emotional loneliness is greater than that of his partner. This condition is one of the main factors that make fathers with young children vulnerable to loneliness, especially in the social aspect. Therefore, a sense of community is an important aspect that men entering fatherhood need to own. A sense of community is a feeling of belonging to a group or community, which is accompanied by emotional attachment and support from fellow members (Jason et al., 2015). In addition to its impact on loneliness, Moisseron-Baudé et al (2022) reported that a sense of community is positively correlated with a sense of meaning. A sense of community will make a father feel that his existence exists so that it can provide a sense of security and provide meaning in his life (King & Hicks 2021).

Another important social relationship for a father is his spouse. Just as sense of community, marriage relations can be categorized as a social connection factor, one of the important factors in the formation of meaning in life (King & Hicks, 2021). Çelik et al. (2022) reported that marital satisfaction positively influences meaning in life. This aligns with Goleń's (2020) findings that, even in difficult conditions, such as those experienced by couples facing infertility, marital satisfaction remains an important factor in the formation of meaning in life. In addition to affecting the meaning of life, marital



satisfaction also influences loneliness. Wickrama et al. (2020) conducted a longitudinal study of 257 married couples over 24 years and found that tensions in the marital relationship in the past tended to lead to loneliness in both partners in the present. Marini et al. (2023) also conducted a similar study among war veterans and found that relationship satisfaction with a spouse can help prevent loneliness in old age. This relates to companionship, specifically spousal affection and understanding from partners, as reported by veterans.

Job stress is a work-related condition that affects a person's psychological and physiological functioning, ultimately impacting performance and daily activities (Baydin et al., 2020). Job-related stress can lead to negative effects, including psychological, physiological, and biological reactions (Ornek & Esin, 2020). One factor that shapes the meaning of life is the presence of affect in daily life. Therefore, job stress that causes negative effects can hinder the formation of meaning in life. Research found that job stress affects the mental well-being of male workers (Mensah, 2021), and loneliness is a form of poor mental well-being that requires special attention (Seifert, 2024).

Internal factors within fathers also play a role in shaping their sense of meaning in life, especially when they have young children. Baldwin et al. (2018) conducted a systematic review of mental health and well-being among first-time fathers. The results showed that three important aspects support the mental health and well-being of new fathers, namely fatherhood identity, the challenges of living a new role as a father, and the negative feelings and fears that accompany it. Fathering self-efficacy is part of a father's identity (Kuscul & Adamson, 2022), encompassing feelings of capability in parenting (Sims & Skarbek, 2018) and confidence in controlling new situations as a father (Trahan, 2018). When a father has good self-efficacy, his fatherhood identity will form more quickly and strongly. This identity plays an important role in helping fathers feel that their lives are more meaningful. In addition, a positive self-identity, formed through parenting efficacy, can also protect fathers from mental health problems, such as loneliness (Baldwin et al., 2018).

This study focuses on the factors that lead fathers with children under five years old to experience loneliness. The main objective is to examine the relationship between loneliness among fathers and several independent variables, namely marital satisfaction, fathering self-efficacy, sense of community, job stress, and meaning in life as a mediating variable. Hopefully, the results of this study will provide deeper insights into the loneliness experienced by fathers with young children.

METHOD

This research uses a quantitative approach based on Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). This approach was chosen because of the exploratory nature of the research, so PLS-SEM is considered suitable for analyzing complex models (Hair et al., 2017). Respondents total 256 fathers who meet the criteria: being married, living with a partner, and having children aged up to 5 years. This study uses a cross-sectional design, in which data collection is conducted at a single point in time. Six variables are measured: loneliness as the dependent variable, meaning in life as the mediating variable, and fathering self-efficacy, sense of community, marital satisfaction, and job stress as independent variables.

Data collection in this study was conducted using an online questionnaire. Loneliness was measured using the UCLA Loneliness Scale developed by Russel (1996). This scale is unidimensional (example item: I feel isolated from people around me).



Presence meaning in life using the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) with the Presence Meaning in Life sub-scale developed by Steger et al. (2006) (example item: I understand the meaning of my life). Job stress was measured using the job stress scale developed by Shukla & Srivastave (2016).

This scale consists of two dimensions: time stress and anxiety (e.g., I have a lot of work and fear that I will not have much time to do it). Marital satisfaction was measured using the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (KMSS) developed by Schumm et al. (1985). It is a unidimensional scale (example item: how satisfied are you with your marriage?). Sense of community is measured using the Sense of Community Scale developed by Jason et al. (2015). This scale consists of 4 dimensions: needs fulfillment, group membership, influence, and emotional connection (e.g., I feel like a member of this community/group). Fathering self-efficacy was measured using the Fathering Self-Efficacy Scale (FSES) developed by Sevigny et al. (2016). This scale has 3 dimensions: positive engagement, direct care, and financial responsibility (e.g., "I can help my child overcome his feelings"). All scales in this study were adapted and translated from English into Indonesian Language. Data were analyzed using PLS-SEM with the help of the Smart PLS 4 tool.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

To provide a clearer understanding of participants' background, the demographic characteristics of the fathers involved in this study are presented in Table 1. The table summarizes information on age, education level, length of marriage, work duration, and monthly income.

Table 1.
Demographics Data

		Frequency	Percent
Father's Age	<25 years old	2	0.781
	25-30 years old	93	36.328
	31-35 years old	69	26.953
	36-40 years old	77	30.078
	41-45 years old	13	5.078
	>50 years old	2	0.781
Father's Education Level	Junior High School	2	0.781
	Senior High School	42	16.406
	Diploma	54	21.094
	Bachelor's Degree	135	52.734
	Master's Degree	23	8.984
Age Range of Marriage	1-5 years	111	43.359
	6-10 years	101	39.453
	11-15 years	35	13.672
	16-20 years	8	3.125
	>20 years	1	0.391
Work Duration (hours)	4-5 hours	13	5.078
	6-8 hours	199	77.734



	9-10 hours	36	14.063
	>10 hours	8	3.125
Income/month (IDR)	< 1.000.000	7	2.734
	1.000.001 - 3.000.000	12	4.688
	3.000.001 - 5.000.000	67	26.172
	5.000.001 - 8.000.000	98	38.281
	8.000.001 - 10.000.000	40	15.625
	10.000.001 - 15.000.000	13	5.078
	>15.000.000	19	7.422
Child's Age	Under 1 year old	18	7.031
	1 year old	50	19.531
	2 years old	48	18.750
	3 years old	67	26.172
	4 years old	45	17.578
	5 years old	28	10.938
Child's Gender	Male	127	49.609
	Female	129	50.391
Number of Children	1	136	53.125
	2	102	39.844
	3	13	5.078
	4	5	1.953

Table 1 shows that the majority of respondents were fathers aged 25-30 years (36%). Most had a bachelor's degree (53%) and a marriage duration of 1-5 years (43%). Most fathers worked for 6-8 hours per day (78%), with the highest monthly income in the range of Rp5,000,001-Rp8,000,000 (38%). The majority of respondents had one child (53%), with the child being 3 years old (26%).



Table 2.
 Outer Loading

Variable	Aspect	Factor Loading	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)	Fornel-Larcker
Job Stress	Time Stress	0.770 – 0.856	0.892	0.673	0,838 (fulfilled)
	Anxiety	0.800 – 0.863	0.904	0.702	0,821 (fulfilled)
Marital Satisfaction		1.000	1.000	1.000	0,100 (fulfilled)
Fathering Self Efficacy	Positive Engagement	0.641 – 0.763	0.799	0.500	0,707 (fulfilled)
	Direct Care	0.752 – 0.799	0.751	0.602	0,776 (fulfilled)
	Financial Responsibility	0.713 – 0.731	0.767	0.524	0,724 (fulfilled)
Sense of Community	Needs Fulfillment	0.750 – 0.839	0.775	0.633	0,796 (fulfilled)
	Group Membership	0.745 – 0.830	0.767	0.622	0,789 (fulfilled)
	Influence	0.614 – 0.862	0.712	0.560	0,748 (fulfilled)
	Emotional Connection	0.565 – 0.911	0.719	0.575	0,758 (fulfilled)
Presence Meaning in Life		0.671 – 0.818	0.784	0.549	0,741 (fulfilled)
Loneliness		0.727 – 0.819	0.884	0.603	0,777 (fulfilled)

Based on Table 2, all items on the measuring instrument have valid outer loadings, so they can be used in further analysis. Internal consistency reliability is evaluated using composite reliability, with a minimum value of 0.6 (Hair et al., 2017). Convergent validity is reviewed through the loading factor value, where the minimum acceptable value is 0.4 (Hair et al., 2017), as well as the average variance extracted (AVE) value, which must be more than 0.5. Meanwhile, discriminant validity is tested using the Fornell-Larcker Criterion, which requires that the square root of each construct's AVE be greater than its correlations with other constructs. The analysis results show that all measuring instruments meet the criteria for validity and reliability, making them suitable for further analysis.



Table 3.
 Inner Loading / Path Analysis

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
Job Stress -> Loneliness	0.627	0.628	0.063	9.917	0.000
Job Stress -> Meaning in Life	-0.079	-0.083	0.074	1.075	0.283
MS -> Loneliness	-0.032	-0.032	0.043	0.757	0.449
MS -> Meaning in Life	0.088	0.087	0.051	1.711	0.087
Self-Efficacy -> Loneliness	0.211	0.211	0.068	3.081	0.002
Self-Efficacy -> Meaning in Life	0.171	0.170	0.084	2.028	0.043
Sense of Community -> Loneliness	-0.193	-0.194	0.052	3.707	0.000
Sense of Community -> Meaning in Life	0.382	0.386	0.068	5.643	0.000
Meaning in Life -> Loneliness	-0.386	-0.388	0.051	7.555	0.000

Table 3 shows that meaning in life partially mediates the relationship between self-efficacy and a sense of community in predicting loneliness among fathers. This means that self-efficacy and a sense of community can still directly affect loneliness, even without going through meaning in life. Meanwhile, meaning in life does not act as a mediator in the relationship between job stress and loneliness, but job stress does have a direct influence on loneliness. In addition, marital satisfaction does not significantly affect meaning in life or loneliness in fathers. The adjusted R-square value of 0.613 indicates that this model is in the strong category (Hair et al., 2017). To illustrate these findings more clearly, the structural model is presented below (see Figure 1).

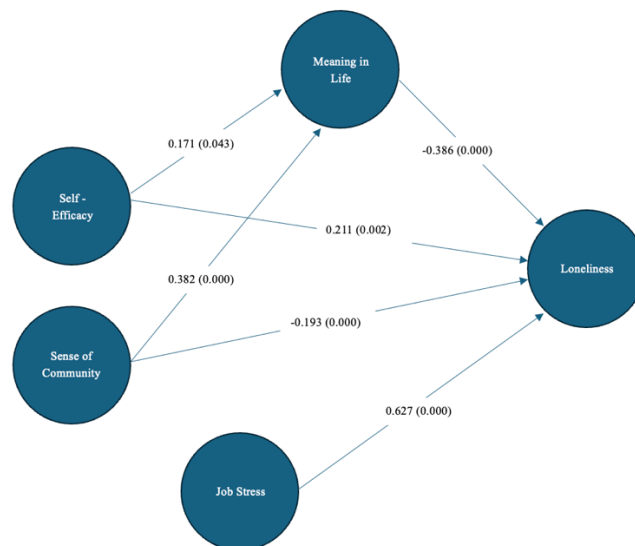


Figure 1. Structural Model of the Relationships among Job Stress, Sense of Community, Self-Efficacy, Meaning in Life, and Loneliness (PLS-SEM Results)



Discussion

The perception that fathers are not primary caregivers contributes to the lack of discussion, both in the public sphere and in scientific studies, about the transition to fatherhood (Wells et al, 2020). On the other hand, the large and rapid changes that occur when a man becomes a father can increase the risk of mental health disorders, including loneliness (Pedersen et al, 2021). The findings of this study indicate that meaning in life acts as a protective factor, helping fathers avoid loneliness after the birth of a child. In addition, fathering self-efficacy, which reflects a father's belief in his ability to care for a child, was shown to influence meaning in life and loneliness. The feeling of belonging to a community (sense of community) also contributes to the formation of meaning in life and reduces loneliness among fathers.

Interestingly, job stress had no effect on meaning in life but did have a direct effect on loneliness. Meanwhile, marital satisfaction has no significant effect on meaning in life or loneliness in fathers. This finding reinforces previous studies indicating that meaning in life is a protective factor against loneliness (Folker et al., 2020; Borawski et al, 2022), including among fathers new to their role. Meaning in life was also found to have a greater influence on loneliness than physical health and social connectedness (Macià et al., 2021). Individuals with high meaning in life tend to have a positive orientation towards others and higher levels of optimism. In addition, meaning in life can increase interpersonal attractiveness and individuals' ability to stay connected to the social world, helping them overcome loneliness (Folker et al., 2020). Meaning in life also allows a person to give meaning to lived experiences (Steger et al., 2006), manage negative emotions (Çağış et al., 2023), and maintain hope during challenges (Einav & Margalit, 2020), so it can help fathers deal with the dynamics of their new role and reduce the risk of loneliness.

Social connection is an important factor in preventing loneliness (King & Hicks, 2021). Among fathers with young children, the high demands of parenting can leave them feeling socially isolated. This is exacerbated by findings that husbands tend to have a narrower social circle than wives Ermer & Proulx (2019). Under these conditions, feeling accepted in a group becomes very important for fathers to avoid feelings of alienation. Emotional attachment and support from community members become social resources that help fathers cope with their new role (Jason et al., 2015). Acceptance in the community not only provides a sense of security and ensures social existence but also positively impacts the formation of meaning in life (Moisseron-Baudé et al, 2022). A sense of community helps reduce loneliness: the greater a person's sense of belonging to a community, the less likely they are to feel lonely (Jason et al., 2015).

In addition, the rapid and intense transition to fatherhood can significantly impact an individual's psychological state (Baldwin et al., 2018). In this situation, fathering self-efficacy, which is the father's belief in his ability to care for children, plays an important role in shaping the meaning of life. When fathers feel capable of fulfilling their role, they tend to feel in control of the situation, which strengthens their involvement and validates their fathering identity (Sims & Skarbek, 2018; Trahan, 2018). Paternal self-efficacy also serves as a resilience factor that can reduce the risk of loneliness in new fathers (Trahan & Shafer, 2019). Furthermore, these beliefs encourage more active involvement in childcare (Liu et al., 2022), which, in turn, can reduce feelings of social isolation and increase feelings of interpersonal connectedness, thereby contributing to lower levels of loneliness. Research also has consistently demonstrated that parental self-efficacy constitutes an important protective factor for fathers' mental health and parenting outcomes. Empirical evidence indicates that higher levels of paternal self-efficacy are



linked to reduced psychological distress during the postnatal period (Rominov et al., 2016). Moreover, paternal self-efficacy has been shown to moderate the association between depression and parenting warmth, thereby functioning as a resilience factor for fathers experiencing depressive symptoms (Trahan & Shafer, 2019).

The results of this study indicate that job stress on fathers does not significantly affect meaning in life. This can be explained by recognizing that fatherhood itself is the primary source of meaning in life. The experience of becoming a father, especially for the first time, is intense and changes a man's priorities and direction in life (Marquez-Doren et al., 2021). In this context, the meaning of life is influenced more by existential significance, i.e., the extent to which individuals understand and believe in the meaning of their existence, than by everyday experiences such as work pressure (King & Hicks, 2021). Thus, even though a father experiences job-related distress, he can still feel meaning in life if he views his role as a father as important and valuable.

Interestingly, although meaning in life did not moderate the relationship between job stress and loneliness, job stress still showed a direct effect on loneliness. Based on data findings, it was found that of all pathways, job stress has the strongest relationship with loneliness. This finding is in line with previous research, which states that excessive work pressure and demands can harm fathers' mental health, including increasing the risk of loneliness (Mensah, 2021; Seifert, 2024). High workloads often reduce opportunities for social interaction, both with family and the surrounding environment, leading to feelings of isolation (Fujii et al., 2021). In addition, high workload can increase work-to-home interference, disrupting the balance between work and personal life and ultimately exacerbating feelings of loneliness (Walz et al., 2024). This condition will make fathers more prone to experiencing loneliness.

In addition, this study found that marital satisfaction had no significant effect on meaning in life or loneliness in fathers. This finding can be explained in terms of the father's role identity. According to Kuscul and Adamsons (2022), a father's identity is formed from a combination of personal and relational characteristics but is mostly determined by instrumental roles, such as provider and family protector. Therefore, a father's sense of meaning in life is more likely to be shaped by the extent to which he feels successful in performing these functions than by the quality of the marital relationship. A father may be satisfied with his relationship with his spouse, but if he feels he is failing in his role as a father, he may still lose meaning in life and experience loneliness.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that meaning in life moderates the relationship between fathering self-efficacy and sense of community with loneliness among fathers with children under five, but not between job stress and loneliness, although job stress directly affects loneliness. Marital satisfaction also showed no significant effect on either meaning in life or loneliness. These findings suggest that meaning in life serves as a psychological buffer, protecting fathers from loneliness by fostering confidence in caregiving and social involvement. Moreover, the ability to manage work stress and engage in supportive communities is key to reducing loneliness. The study underscores the need for more attention to fathers' mental health, which remains underexplored despite cultural expectations for men to remain strong. Given the cross-sectional design, longitudinal research is recommended to better capture changes in fathers' psychological conditions across different stages of fatherhood.



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