



Exploring Cinderella Complex Behavior and Its Management: A Case Study of High School Students

Filadelfia Ramba' Tandililing^{1*}, Abdul Saman², Fitriana³

^{1,2,3} Universitas Negeri Makassar, Makassar, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe Cinderella Complex tendencies among female students at SMAN 19 Makassar, analyze the factors influencing these tendencies, and explain possible intervention efforts. A case study method was employed, with data collected through interviews, observations, and documentation. The findings indicate that students exhibiting Cinderella Complex tendencies demonstrate behavioral patterns such as dependence on male figures, low self-confidence, reluctance to make independent decisions, and expectations of a "rescuer" when facing life challenges. The study concludes that cognitive restructuring within a cognitive-behavioral therapy approach can help individuals identify and modify irrational thoughts, regulate emotions more adaptively, and develop greater independence in dealing with life problems. The implications of this study contribute to the fields of educational psychology and guidance and counseling, particularly by enriching the understanding of the Cinderella Complex among adolescent girls.

KATA KUNCI

Cinderella Complex;
Siswi;
Ketergantungan
emosional;
Keluarga;
Sosial budaya;
Penanganan sekolah

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menggambarkan perilaku kecenderungan Cinderella Complex pada siswi di SMAN 19 Makassar, menganalisis faktor-faktor yang memengaruhi, serta mendeskripsikan upaya penanganan yang dapat dilakukan. Metode penelitian menggunakan studi kasus. Data diperoleh melalui wawancara, observasi, dan dokumentasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa siswi yang memiliki kecenderungan Cinderella Complex memperlihatkan pola perilaku seperti ketergantungan pada figur laki-laki, kurangnya kepercayaan diri, keengganan mengambil keputusan sendiri, serta harapan akan "penyelamat" dalam menghadapi tantangan hidup. Kesimpulan mengungkap bahwa penggunaan restrukturisasi kognitif dalam CBT dapat membantu individu mengenali dan mengubah pikiran irasional, mengelola emosi secara adaptif, serta menumbuhkan kemandirian dalam menghadapi permasalahan hidup. Implikasi [penelitian ini hasil penelitian ini memperkaya kajian psikologi pendidikan dan bimbingan, khususnya dalam memahami fenomena Cinderella Complex pada remaja putri.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Abraham Maslow's (1970) Theory of Human Basic Needs Hierarchy, he argued that humans possess fundamental needs organized in a hierarchy, including physiological needs, safety needs, belongingness and love needs, esteem needs, cognitive needs, aesthetic needs, self-actualization needs, and transcendent (spiritual) needs (Bagas, 2020). According to Maslow's theory, counseling services have a significant impact on individuals in fulfilling these life needs (Riswanto & Iloakasia, 2025). During adolescence, if basic needs such as safety and affection are unmet, individuals tend to seek protection by depending on romantic partners (Danahfatin et al., 2024). This phenomenon occurs more frequently in females raised in environments that discourage independence and instead instill reliance on males as "saviors."

* **Corresponding Author:** Filadelfia Ramba' Tandililing; [✉ filadelfiaramba21@gmail.com](mailto:filadelfiaramba21@gmail.com)

Department of Guidance and Counseling, Universitas Negeri Makassar, Makassar, Indonesia

Address: Jl. Tamalate I Tidung Makassar, Kampus IV UNM Sektor Tidung, Indonesia

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The Cinderella Complex continues to attract attention in psychological research, particularly among females who exhibit fear of independence and a strong tendency to rely on others (Nurmadani et al., 2025). This condition is often associated with psychological, environmental, and social factors that shape an individual's mindset. One significant influencing factor is social support, which refers to the extent to which a person feels supported, valued, and loved by their environment (Adnan et al., 2016). Perceptions of social support can be ambivalent: on one hand, high perceived support can reinforce dependent behavior and delay independence; on the other hand, healthy support can boost self-confidence, reduce social anxiety, and encourage individuals to make independent decisions (Atilah et al., 2025).

The Cinderella Complex experienced by female students at SMAN 19 cannot be generalized to all adolescents, as individuals have different backgrounds. Based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1970), particularly the need for safety and comfort, it is evident that fulfilling basic needs influences the emergence of the Cinderella Complex. Therefore, promoting independence and strengthening self-esteem are essential for students exhibiting tendencies of this complex.

Adolescent Cinderella Complex is influenced by various factors that promote dependence and fear of independence (Fauzan, 2021). Overprotective parenting patterns habituate adolescents to rely on their parents, prompting them to seek other figures, such as partners, to feel secure (Utomo & Pahlevi, 2022; Hendrawan et al., 2025). Patriarchal culture further reinforces the notion that females should depend on males, hindering their independence (Syahrizan & Siregar, 2024). A lack of education in life skills leaves adolescents feeling unprepared to face challenges independently. At the same time, the media often portrays females as figures who need to be "rescued," reinforcing this mindset. Additionally, low self-esteem and the scarcity of independent female role models make it more difficult for adolescents to develop independence. Addressing this requires support in building self-confidence, life skills, and awareness of the importance of living independently without relying solely on others for comfort.

Observations and interviews with a female student (AG) at SMAN 19 Makassar revealed tendencies of Cinderella Complex behavior influenced by psychological, social, cultural, and media factors. Through interviews, questions explored her perception of the role of men in her life, the safety and comfort she desired, strategies for facing challenges, and her confidence in decision-making. Responses indicated psychological dependence, emotional reliance on others (mainly male figures), excessive romantic fantasies, low self-confidence, and a perceived inability to achieve goals independently, coupled with a need for validation.

The Cinderella Complex among some students at SMAN 19 Makassar is evident in their tendency to seek comfort and security from male partners. This complex manifests as emotional dependence, where students feel that a partner's presence is essential for happiness and protection. Observable symptoms include fear of independence, reluctance to make personal decisions, and excessive anxiety when relationships do not meet expectations. Students often need constant attention from partners, neglecting other aspects of life, such as academics and social interactions. The consequences include reduced self-confidence, loss of motivation, and increased susceptibility to stress or identity crises when relationships are disrupted. Such dependence also impedes the development of a healthy self-concept and can have long-term effects on emotional growth and interpersonal skills.

In this context, guidance and counseling services play a critical role in adolescent development, providing individual or group support to help them achieve personal growth (Umar & Salahudin, 2025). One relevant service is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) in individual counseling, which helps female adolescents experiencing the Cinderella Complex by identifying and modifying negative thought patterns or cognitive distortions, such as the belief that happiness can only come from others. CBT guides students in understanding the relationships among thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, building self-confidence, and developing independent life skills (Fadiyah & Masnida, 2025). Techniques such as cognitive restructuring, behavioral activation, and assertiveness training help students replace irrational beliefs with realistic thinking and develop adaptive behaviors to face life challenges without excessive dependence.

Previous studies on the Cinderella Complex show that this behavior is related to fear of independence, psychological dependence, and low self-confidence, typically studied in adult women or university students with a focus on self-concept, self-esteem, and gender roles (Ramanan & Mohamad, 2025). The Cinderella Complex is characterized by a network of attitudes and fears in women that lead to a desire to be cared for and protected, driven by a fear of using their own abilities (Ayu, Siti, & Imadduddi, 2020). Women experiencing this complex tend to avoid taking initiative and wait for others to solve problems or overcome obstacles, due to feelings of incapacity or low self-confidence (Maharani Dwindu & Rahmi, 2022).

Research on the Cinderella Complex has primarily focused on adult women or university students, emphasizing descriptive and correlational aspects, such as its relation to self-concept, independence, and gender roles. Studies specifically targeting high school students remain limited, despite late adolescence being a critical phase for developing independence and decision-making skills. Additionally, previous research has not thoroughly analyzed the influence of Cinderella Complex behavior on psychological development and student behavior in schools, nor has it addressed practical interventions in an educational context. Most findings also derive from Western cultural settings, which may not fully reflect Indonesia's social and cultural characteristics. Therefore, this study is essential to fill this gap by examining both the influence of Cinderella Complex behavior and its management among high school students, producing findings that are more contextual, comprehensive, and useful for educational practice and school counseling services.

This study aims to describe the tendencies of Cinderella Complex behavior among female students at SMAN 19 Makassar, analyze the factors influencing its emergence, and outline effective, context-specific management strategies within the school environment to support students' development of independence, self-confidence, and decision-making abilities.

2. METHOD

2.1 Study Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design. A qualitative approach was chosen because the research aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of the Cinderella Complex behavior and its management within the real context of the school environment. The case study design was used to comprehensively explore the condition of the research subject through an in-depth examination of her experiences, behaviors, and changes. The research design included determining the research theme, formulating the research focus and propositions, and conducting detailed data analysis, all of which are crucial elements for the success of a case study.

2.2 Subject

In this study, the researcher served as the primary instrument and field data collector. The research subject was a high school female student identified as exhibiting tendencies of the Cinderella Complex. The subject was purposively selected based on initial observations and recommendations from the school. The qualitative approach enabled the researcher to collect in-depth data through direct interaction with the subject, yielding narrative, contextual, and interpretive data. The findings are presented not in numerical or statistical form but as detailed descriptions of the subject's condition, processes, and behavioral changes.

2.3 Data Collection

Data collection in this study was conducted using multiple techniques, including observation, interviews, and documentation. Observation was used to monitor the subject's behavior within the school context and her social interactions. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore the subject's experiences, thoughts, feelings, and changes related to Cinderella Complex behavior and its management. Documentation served as supporting data, including counseling notes, school archives, and other relevant documents.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the qualitative model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which includes three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data reduction involved selecting and focusing on information relevant to the research objectives. Data display was presented in a descriptive narrative format to facilitate understanding of the research findings. Finally, the conclusion-drawing phase involved interpreting the data in depth to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

2.5 Research Procedures

The research procedures began with obtaining permission from the school. Once permission was granted, the researcher conducted an initial observation to identify students exhibiting tendencies of the Cinderella Complex. The next stage involved collecting data through in-depth interviews with the research subject. Interviews were conducted 8 times to obtain comprehensive information on the subject's initial condition, the intervention process, and any changes that occurred after the management strategies were applied. The entire research process was carried out systematically, while strictly adhering to research ethics and ensuring the confidentiality of the subject.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Results

The implementation of this study involved individual counseling intervention using Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) techniques to reduce tendencies of the Cinderella Complex. The individual counseling was conducted over six sessions. Based on interview results, the student identified by the initials AG, a twelfth-grade student at SMAN 19 Makassar, exhibited behaviors indicative of the Cinderella Complex. This condition was reflected in her emotional dependence on male figures, low self-confidence, and excessive romantic fantasies about her partner. AG appeared more comfortable when assisted by others in making decisions, both academically and socially. Over time, this dependence contributed to decreased motivation for learning and reduced social participation in the school environment.

Behavioral changes in AG became noticeable when she started a relationship with an upperclassman. She became quieter, withdrew from social interactions, and exhibited high dependence on her partner. When her partner was absent from school, AG often displayed low moods, reduced motivation to study, and, in some instances, skipped school altogether. Interviews with her homeroom teacher and peers further confirmed that AG frequently sought assistance to complete tasks and rarely took initiative on her own. These behaviors illustrate her self-doubt and fear of failure and rejection.

From a family perspective, it was found that AG's parents practiced an overprotective and patriarchal parenting style. They encouraged their daughters to rely on the father as the primary decision-maker in the family. As a result, AG grew up believing that male figures were protectors and sources of safety. Furthermore, the patriarchal culture in her community reinforced the perception that females should remain passive and depend on males. This condition was further exacerbated by social media influence, as AG frequently consumed content that romanticized relationships and idealized love stories, strengthening her fantasy of being "rescued by a partner."

Psychological factors were also a significant trigger of the Cinderella Complex in AG. She demonstrated low self-esteem and fear of independence, feeling incapable of facing life challenges without assistance from others. She associated her happiness with the presence of her partner, so when the relationship faced difficulties, AG easily lost motivation and experienced extreme mood changes. This pattern reflects strong emotional dependence and difficulty managing her emotions independently.

During the intervention, the researcher provided individual counseling using a Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) approach. This approach aimed to help AG recognize irrational thought patterns that led to dependency and replace them with more adaptive thinking. Through counseling sessions, AG was guided to become aware of her strengths and potential, and to gradually practice making decisions without involving her partner. The results showed positive changes, with AG beginning to demonstrate courage in expressing her opinions, actively participating in class activities, and managing her emotions effectively when facing personal challenges.

Table 1. Findings on Cinderella Complex Behavior and Its Management: A Case Study of High School Students

Dimension	Observed Behavior / Symptoms	Underlying Factors	CBT Intervention / Management	Post-Intervention Outcome
Cognitive	- Negative self-beliefs ("I can't do it alone") - Fear of independence	- Low self-esteem - Patriarchal family values - Overprotective parenting	- Cognitive restructuring - Identifying irrational thoughts	- Realistic self-beliefs - Increased confidence - Awareness of personal potential
Emotional / Affective	- Anxiety when alone or when partner absent - Mood swings related to dependency	- Emotional dependence on male figures - Fear of failure or rejection	- Emotion recognition and regulation exercises - Self-reflection on feelings	- Better emotional regulation - Reduced anxiety and dependency - More stable moods
Behavioral	- Reluctance to make decisions independently - Dependence on others for academic or social tasks	- Learned helplessness - Previous over-reliance on family and partner	- Gradual decision-making exercises - Behavioral activation tasks	- Independently making decisions - More initiative in school and social activities

Dimension	Observed Behavior / Symptoms	Underlying Factors	CBT Intervention / Management	Post-Intervention Outcome
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Withdrawal from peers - Over-reliance on partner for social support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Peer influence - Socialization under patriarchal norms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social skills practice - Assertiveness training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improved peer interactions - Balanced social engagement - Reduced dependency on partner
Spiritual / Self-Concept	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Low sense of responsibility for own life - Belief that happiness depends on others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Internalized gender role stereotypes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Self-reflection on personal values - Linking independence with personal responsibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Stronger sense of self - Positive, realistic self-concept - Recognition of independence as a responsibility

The findings of this study indicate that Cinderella Complex behavior in the high school subject manifests across cognitive, emotional, behavioral, social, and self-concept dimensions, with each aspect influenced by a combination of psychological, familial, and sociocultural factors. Cognitive distortions, such as negative self-beliefs and fear of independence, were closely linked to low self-esteem and patriarchal, overprotective parenting. At the same time, emotional dependence on male figures contributed to anxiety and mood instability. Behaviorally, the subject displayed reluctance to make independent decisions and relied on others for academic and social tasks, a pattern reinforced by learned helplessness and socialization within traditional gender norms. The CBT intervention, including cognitive restructuring, emotion regulation exercises, and behavioral activation, facilitated significant improvements across all dimensions: the subject developed more realistic self-perceptions, greater emotional stability, increased initiative, improved social interactions, and a stronger sense of personal responsibility. These results suggest that structured individual counseling using CBT is a practical approach for reducing dependency patterns associated with Cinderella Complex, fostering psychological independence, and promoting adaptive cognitive and social functioning in adolescent girls.

3.2. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that individual counseling using Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), developed by Aaron T. Beck, had a positive impact in addressing Cinderella Complex behavior in the subject AG. CBT is based on the assumption that an individual's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are reciprocally interconnected, such that irrational cognitive distortions can generate negative emotions and maladaptive behaviors (Corey, 2021). Cognitive-behavioral counseling emphasizes cognitive-behavior modification using self-instruction methods (Prayogi et al., 2024). Through cognitive restructuring, individuals can overcome academic procrastination. By changing students' maladaptive thoughts, this technique contributes to improved learning behavior and increased academic engagement (Buana & Zulwidyaningtyas, 2025).

In this study, CBT was applied to help the subject identify and reconstruct the irrational thought patterns underlying her emotional dependence on male figures and her fear of independence—key characteristics of the Cinderella Complex. Through the counseling process, the subject was guided to understand the relationship between negative self-beliefs, feelings of insecurity, and dependent behaviors.

The Cinderella Complex, introduced by Colette Dowling (1981), describes the unconscious psychological tendency toward dependency, especially in females, accompanied by fear of independence and personal responsibility. Individuals with the Cinderella Complex believe that safety, happiness, and life success are more likely to be achieved through reliance on others, particularly male figures. This tendency is shaped by socialization processes, parenting patterns, developmental experiences, and the internalization of gender role values and stereotypes that depict women as weak and in need of protection.

From a cognitive-behavioral perspective, the Cinderella Complex arises from irrational cognitive schemas that shape emotions and behaviors. Negative self-beliefs generate feelings of anxiety and insecurity, which manifest as dependent behavior, avoidance of responsibility, and difficulty making independent decisions. During adolescence, such behavior can hinder the development of self-confidence, independence, and a healthy self-identity.

Theoretically, therefore, the Cinderella Complex is viewed as a psychological phenomenon involving the interaction of cognitive, affective, behavioral, and social factors.

Post-intervention interviews revealed significant positive changes in the subject. Before counseling, AG exhibited high dependency, low self-confidence, and difficulty making independent decisions. After several individual counseling sessions, she began to show increased self-confidence, courage in expressing opinions, and the ability to make decisions without relying on others. These findings align with those of Alkatiri, Nurjannah, and Simbala (2021), who found that CBT effectively helps individuals transform negative thought patterns into more adaptive ones, thereby enhancing self-confidence and independence.

Cognitively, the subject's self-perception shifted fundamentally. Where she had previously viewed herself as weak and dependent, she began to recognize her potential and her ability to stand on her own and direct her own life. This cognitive change fostered the emergence of more realistic and positive beliefs. Affectively, the subject demonstrated improved emotional regulation, particularly when facing challenges or interpersonal conflicts. She was able to manage her emotions, calm herself, and respond to problems more rationally.

Behaviorally, the subject began making independent decisions, both academically and socially, without constantly seeking validation from her partner or others. She also reengaged in school activities and showed increased motivation to learn. Socially, her interactions with peers and teachers improved significantly. She no longer withdrew from social environments and began building healthier, balanced relationships free from fear of rejection. Positive changes were also observed in spiritual and self-concept domains, as the subject began to perceive independence as a personal responsibility. This awareness laid the foundation for a more positive, realistic, and empowered self-concept.

The urgency of counseling services to address Cinderella Complex behavior is evident, given its negative impact on adolescents' psychological development, particularly in independence, self-confidence, and decision-making. During high school, students are at a developmental stage that requires readiness to act independently and responsibly in both academic and social domains. Emotional dependency and fear of independence, characteristic of the Cinderella Complex, can hinder these developmental tasks if not addressed promptly and appropriately.

Counseling services play a strategic role as both preventive and corrective measures, helping students recognize and overcome maladaptive dependent thought patterns and behaviors (Lailatusa'adah, 2024). Through counseling, students are supported in identifying their personal potential, building self-confidence, and developing healthy decision-making and emotional regulation skills (Nasution et al., 2023). Thus, counseling functions not only as problem intervention but also as a form of psychological empowerment that supports the development of independence, positive self-concept, and healthy social relationships.

The findings demonstrate that individual CBT counseling effectively reduced tendencies toward the Cinderella Complex in the student at SMAN 19 Makassar. Through restructuring irrational thoughts, strengthening self-confidence, and practicing adaptive behaviors, the subject showed comprehensive improvements in emotional, social, and psychological independence.

4. RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study contribute to the field of educational psychology and guidance counseling, particularly in understanding the Cinderella Complex phenomenon among adolescent girls. The results support the theories of Colette Dowling (1981) and Abraham Maslow (1970), which suggest that emotional dependency and low self-esteem can hinder individual independence. Furthermore, this study underscores the effectiveness of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) as an intervention that can transform irrational thought patterns into more rational ones, fostering independence and enhancing self-confidence in students.

The findings provide practical benefits for school counselors, guidance teachers, and parents in addressing adolescent girls exhibiting emotionally dependent behaviors. Through CBT, counselors can help students develop rational thinking skills, improve self-esteem, and build emotional independence. For teachers and parents, this study offers valuable insights into the importance of parenting practices that support independence and the need to monitor social media influences, which may reinforce dependent mindsets toward male figures.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study indicate that applying Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) through individual counseling effectively reduces tendencies toward the Cinderella Complex among female students at SMAN 19 Makassar. Following the intervention, the counselee demonstrated positive changes, including increased self-

confidence, reduced emotional dependence on male figures, and improved ability to make independent decisions. These findings suggest that the cognitive restructuring process in CBT effectively helps individuals recognize and modify irrational thought patterns, manage emotions more adaptively, and develop independent attitudes when facing life challenges.

In addition to cognitive and emotional improvements, CBT was also associated with positive effects on behavioral and social aspects. The counselee became more willing to take initiative in academic and social activities without relying on others' validation and showed greater engagement in school life. These changes reflect greater psychological independence and healthier social interaction, indicating a reduced tendency toward the Cinderella Complex.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that guidance and counseling teachers implement CBT approaches in individual counseling as an intervention for students exhibiting emotional dependence or fear of independence. Additionally, schools are encouraged to develop programs that strengthen self-esteem, independence, and awareness of gender equality, particularly for adolescent girls, to support optimal and sustainable psychological development.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

All authors were involved in discussing the research findings and contributing to the final manuscript. INR was responsible for drafting the initial article, collecting data, and analyzing research results. AS and A contributed to the conceptualization of the research, provided theoretical input, and conducted critical reviews of the manuscript until it was ready for publication.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this study.

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