

Malaysian bereaved fathers' experiences after the traumatic death of their child



Nur Atikah Mohamed Hussin

Senior lecturer, School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia
atikah.mhussin@usm.my



Anna Liisa Aho

Adjunct professor, Tampere University, Finland
annaliisa.aho@tuni.fi

Abstract: After the death of a child, bereaved fathers may experience tremendous loss. However, the experiences of bereaved fathers after the death of a child have rarely been studied within the academic literature. This qualitative study aims to explore the experiences of bereaved fathers after their loss. The sample consisted of 12 Malaysian bereaved fathers who lost their child due to accidents (n=11) and homicide (n=1). The findings reported themes which were memories that never end, challenges post-loss, and life after the loss. Subthemes emerged from the data which addressed health issues, stigma, challenges to understand spouses, feelings of emptiness and blaming, growth post-loss, and ongoing relationships. Even though Malay people accept the concept of fate is decided by God, they still have difficulty reconciling their emotions and their beliefs where bereavement is due to traumatic death.

Keywords: fathers' grief, death of a child, qualitative study

Introduction

The effect of a traumatic death for bereaved parents is very intense (Mohamed Hussin, Guàrdia-Olmos, & Aho, 2018a). After a traumatic loss, bereaved parents may experience struggles in meaning-making which can later lead to damage on physical, mental and social levels. Notably, meaning-making is described as central in recovering from stressful experiences such as bereavement, illness, and terrorist attacks (Kernan & Lepore, 2009; Park, Riley, & Snyder, 2012). In a study related to meaning-making coping among cancer patients reported that meaning-making brings positivity by helping the cancer patients to find new goals in life (Ahmadi, Mohamed Hussin, & Mohammad, 2019).

The death of a child may cause tremendous psychological trauma and has been described as a disastrous experience for fathers (Kitson, 2002; Samuelsson, Rådestad, & Segesten, 2001). The loss of a child increases the risk of psychological and physical disorders (Li, Hansen, Mortensen, & Olsen, 2002; de Montigny, Beaudet, &

Dumas, 1999;) and mortality (Davies, 2006; Li, Precht, Mortensen, & Olsen, 2003) among bereaved fathers, as well as an increased lifetime risk of paternal mortality and acute risk (Espinosa & Evans, 2013; Li et al., 2003; Rostila, Saarela, & Kawachi, 2011; Wilcox, Mittendorfer-Rutz, Kjeldgård, Alexanderson, & Runeson, 2014).

Studies in relation to fathers' grief have found that after the death of a child, the bereaved fathers' initial grief responses include shock and disbelief, accompanied with strong emotional reactions, somatic symptoms, and difficulties in social interactions (Aho, Tarkka, Åstedt-Kurki, & Kaunonen, 2009; Badenhorst, Riches, Turton, & Huges, 2006; Samuelsson et al., 2001). Included in the discussion on fathers' responses towards their losses were also discussions which associated fathers' grief with hegemonic masculinity (e.g. Martin & Doka, 2000; Schaefer & Moos, 2001). Hegemonic masculinity is defined as the ideal male behaviors in a society, generally designed to justify male dominance over women to validate social systems of patriarchy (Connell, 1987). A study on Western society and grief reported masculinity as being defined as

being strong and unemotional (Stinson & Lasker, 1992). Studies related to bereavement among fathers have found factors that contribute to a state of denial and pressure that result in further suffering for the fathers (Puddifoot & Johnson, 1997; O'Leary & Thorwick, 2006; Bonnette & Broom, 2011). Bereaved fathers' feelings after the loss are often denied by those close to them, and people expect the bereaved fathers to 'man up' and control themselves from crying or seeking social support (Zinner, 2000).

However, looking at previous literature, most literature has discussed fathers' grief from a Westerners' point of view, although there is some limited literature which has discussed fathers' grieving from a specific cultural perspective such as among Malaysian fathers (eg. Daiming et al., 2016). This study aims to understand the experiences of bereaved fathers before, during, and after their loss among Malaysian bereaved fathers.

The Malay context

In the Malay population, having physical strength and financial capability are signs of masculinity. Additionally, Malay masculinity is strongly influenced by religion and Malay cultural values (Omar, 2006). A man in a family is described as the head of a family, and acts as protector and provider (Ainslie, 2017). Since culture and religion influence grief in bereaved fathers, it is predicted that Malay bereaved fathers hold tightly to Muslim beliefs in *qada* and *qadr* (Divine Will and Decree), the beliefs that everything that happens in the past, present and future falls within God's will.

A study by George, Larson, Koenig, and McCullough (2000) revealed that religious belief provides an understanding that God has the power to control life events. Hence, this belief is found to be helpful in reducing stress among believers and helps in lessening the self-blame which is usually associated with parental grief (Duncan & Cacciatore, 2015). Religion plays a central role in Malay peoples' lives (Oka, Hussin, & Hagström, 2017). As a result, it is also expected that religion may contribute to the form of human bereavement that is followed (Mohamed Hussin et al., 2018). Muslims are prohibited from excessive wailing or weeping in response to death. In addition, there are clear narrations from previous Prophets and verses in the Quran that explain bereavement and the status of bereaved parents. One clear verse in the Quran states that bereaved parents are guaranteed protection against hellfire (Maqsood, 2002). In fact, it is important for Muslims to understand that death is another normal transition within the lifecycle of an individual.

In general, religion is vital to help believers gain stability and find meaning in their own way (Mohamed Hussin et al., 2018). However, a study on the influence of religion on parental grief has also indicated some negative impacts on bereaved parents. A study by Mohamed Hussin et al. (2018b) reported that the inability of bereaved fathers

to grieve openly has increased the risk of them having a problematic spousal relationship. This happens when bereaved fathers do not express their grieving response which leaves the bereaved mothers feeling that the bereaved fathers are insensitive to the loss.

The effects of loss and the influences of culture and religion may cause bereaved fathers to cope with their losses in unique ways. However, the topic of fathers' grief is still scarcely discussed (Spaten et al., 2011), especially in specific ethnic contexts such as Malay bereaved fathers. Notably, most of the literature focuses on bereaved fathers' coping styles and is outdated. Rather than discussing fathers' coping styles in general, this study offers rich descriptions of fathers' experiences after the death of their child and reveals the challenges they experience. It is anticipated that understanding these issues may help raise understanding of fathers' grief issues, and highlight the challenges bereaved fathers experience, benefitting both academics and professionals in the bereavement field.

Methodology

Data collection

To date, there is no specific association or organization which works directly or indirectly with bereaved parents in Malaysia. Given the difficulties in reaching parents who have lost their children due to traumatic death, social media was used to recruit potential respondents for the current study. A blog and a Facebook page on bereavement were created by the researcher to discuss various topics regarding grieving. The researcher had also explained in the blog and on the Facebook page that the social media platforms were solely to be used for academic purposes and the platforms would be used to recruit potential respondents for a study on bereavement. The researcher had advertised the existing of the posts via a specific blog and Facebook page related to parenting issues. To build rapport with the potential respondents, the researcher interacted with the parents on the platforms and encouraged them to talk and share their stories. Only one researcher was involved in the interview sessions to ensure the consistency of the data collection. Bahasa Malaysia (which is the official language of Malaysia) was used throughout the interviews.

A purposive sampling method was used to recruit the respondents. The inclusion criteria were as follows: 1) the respondents were Malaysian; 2) they had lost a child due to a traumatic event; 3) the incident had occurred at least a year in the past; 4) the deceased child was aged below 18 years of age. The sampling was conducted throughout the Peninsular Malaysia. Of the 15 bereaved fathers who were identified 12 agreed to participate (Table 1). All of the bereaved fathers were Malay and Muslim. Each father was given the freedom to choose a time and location of

Table 1. Study participants:

Interviewee	Age	Occupation	Circumstances
F1	34	Teacher	One-year old son, accidental fall
F2	45	Businessman	16-year-old son, motorcycle accident
F3	45	Businessman	16-year-old daughter, motorcycle accident
F4	62	Retired	9-year-old daughter, raped and murdered
F5	42	Retired army	15-year-old daughter, motorcycle accident
F6	35	Teacher	1-year-old son, car accident
F7	42	Businessman	8-year-old son, car accident
F8	46	Hotel staff	2-year-old son, car accident
F9	41	Teacher	10-year-old son, car accident
F10	45	Businessman	16-year-old son, motorcycle accident
F11	43	Clerk	9-year-old son, car accident
F12	49	Businessman	16-year-old daughter, motorcycle accident

convenience for their interview, taking into account ethical concerns such as privacy.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews were conducted at the respondents' house ($n=8$), a mosque ($n=2$) and a restaurant ($n=2$). The interviews lasted from 45–90 minutes.

Method

The study employed open-ended interviews to allow in-depth explorations on the bereaved fathers' experiences following the death of their child. The questions for each interview represented themes that aimed to understand the experiences of bereaved fathers before, during, and after their loss. The semi-structured interviews explored two main themes of the fathers' experiences post-loss: 1) The dynamics of their bereavement where the fathers were asked to share how their grief for their child resulted in events such as gaining social support, and the impacts it had on their psychological wellbeing; and, 2) how they perceived their self-positioning in the process of grieving for their child post-loss.

Ethics

This study gained ethical approval from the internal board of the School of Social Sciences of the Universiti Sains Malaysia, in Malaysia. The interviews started once

respondents confirmed they had understood the study information and given their informed consent to proceed. The informed consent contained information about the nature and objectives of the study, the ethical considerations the researcher would have to abide by for carrying out the research, and relevant contact numbers in case of any emotional or physical emergency arising during or after research. The informed consent was given to the respondents before the interviews started. After they signed the informed consent, a copy was given to the respondents for their future reference.

The respondents were informed of their right to terminate the interview at any time, or not to answer any questions which they found not relevant or disturbing. They were also instructed to inform the researcher if they experienced any psychological distress during or after the interview, and the researchers' contact details and those of a counsellor who they could contact if they experienced any psychological distress during or after the interview were provided.

In addition, this study followed the ethical procedure strictly, coding the respondents' information to ensure anonymity. All the data was stored in secure storage including using laptops with password and all data being destroyed at publication.

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed in full and translated into English using a professional translator and a native speaker who understand both languages, Bahasa Malaysia and English. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which allows the identification of data patterns. Several steps are involved in thematic analysis such as data familiarization, initial code generation, reviewing, and theme identification. For this study, the researcher re-read the data several times to identify thematic codes. These codes were gathered under themes and subthemes. To ensure accuracy and consistency, both of the researchers followed the same data analysis process and their answers were compared.

ATLAS.ti software was used to establish systematic coding and themes within the responses (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2005). The researchers acknowledged the potential limitation that might occur during the data interpretation, hence further steps to establish data validity were required. To achieve this, this study applied the concepts of trustworthiness comprising of credibility, transferability and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To achieve credibility, the participants were encouraged to speak honestly, and purposive sampling was used to recruit the study participants. To achieve transferability, the comprehensive transcriptions in the data collection process, data analysis process, and the participants' information were recorded. Dependability was achieved by reporting

sufficient detail of the findings, and confirmability was achieved by using peer scrutiny discussion for all the processes of this study. Furthermore, the respondents were contacted again to ensure that the translation of their responses were accurate.

Findings

During the analytic process, three main themes emerged from the responses. They are: memories never end, challenges post-loss, life after the loss. From these themes, there were six subthemes that emerged from the data. They are: health issues, stigma, challenge to understand spouses, the feeling of emptiness and blaming, growth post-loss, and ongoing relationship.

Memories never end

In the majority of the responses, the bereaved fathers shared memories of their deceased child during the interviews. After years of losing their child, the memories of spending time together were found to offer the most valuable moments to bereaved fathers. All of the bereaved fathers were smiling when they shared their stories. F7 shared:

'We were close. Maybe because he was a boy. We spent most of the time together. After [full-time] work, I did a part-time job. I set up camps for weddings at my village. He was my everything.'

F5 shared his memories of his deceased daughter. He noted that this father-child relationship was different from his other father-child relationship. The relationship was described as 'special' due to the quality time spent together and the 'friendship' that they had had together.

'We were definitely very close. We were not like an ordinary parent and child relationship. When I rode a motorcycle with her, I pretended to be Superman. We played peeka boo. Even though she was already 16, we still poked each other. We had a special relationship, my soulmate.'

Apart from remembering the time that they had spent together with their child, the deceased child's positive characteristics were found to be the most likely topic that the bereaved fathers discussed in their interviews. All of the bereaved fathers described how they missed their child's attitudes. F3 shared how brilliant his daughter was and even described his daughter as 'the best child':

'She was a brilliant girl. She was good in academic, social and spiritual [aspects]. She could memorize verses in the Quran. Everything that parents in this world wanted she had. She had all of the qualities of a good kid.'

Similarly, another respondent shared the obedient characteristics of his son that had made him a good kid.

'He was an obedient kid. He never said no to his parents. He would eat anything that his mother cooked without any complaint. He was a good kid.'

After the seemingly positive discussions about their child and their memories, bereaved fathers started to discuss their own losses. All of the bereaved fathers reported experiencing extreme feelings after learning of the death of their child. Some of the bereaved fathers described their loss as incomparable. It was devastating and unbearable. F12 said:

'Oh, when I first saw my daughter's body, I felt lost. Half of me had gone. I felt like I had nothing left. I was so devastated. I shouted and almost cried hysterically.'

Some bereaved fathers also expressed the experience as indescribable. This was characterized by a feeling of shock that the fathers felt after learning about their child's death, and which rendered the fathers as being lost and emotionless. F11 shared:

'I was lost. I could not speak. I did not wail but I could feel the tears. The feeling had nothing to compare with. Devastated, sad, hopeless, helpless, all the negative feelings... I seriously did not know how to move on with my life after the loss.'

Some of the bereaved fathers responded that they were feeling empty soon after knowing about the death of their child. F7 shared:

'When the doctor told me that he passed away, I felt empty, I felt numbed. I did not cry; I did not hear anything. I knew my life would be empty without him. He was my everything.'

All of the bereaved fathers shared the moments they first looked at their deceased child's body. Some of the bereaved fathers described feelings of shock and difficulties in believing what they saw. F6 shared:

'At first, when I looked at my son's body, I was extremely shocked. I thought to myself, "is he sleeping?" But I could see that half of his head was gone, he did not cry. He was just like he was sleeping.'

F3 on the other hand shared his difficulties in looking at the dead body. He remarked:

'When I arrived at the location of the accident, I saw her legs. I knew that those legs were my daughter's legs. I shouted. I could not look at her face.'

F4 had a similar experience:

'When I arrived at the location, I saw my daughter's body. Her neck was broken. Her face was black. I fainted. Three times.'

Nevertheless, all of the bereaved parents reported a remembrance that God has helped them to encounter their negative feelings. F1 reported that he almost became insane after the death, yet he remembered his responsibility to God which became relevant post-loss. He shared:

'I almost became insane. I cried most of the time. However, one day I remembered, as a Muslim, this is wrong. I am the Caliph of Allah. I need to always remember Him and take this test as a way for me to gain Jannah.'

Similarly F11 shared:

'Remember God, ask for strength. Everything will be fine. I keep this in my mind and heart.'

Challenges post-loss

After the death of a child, the bereaved fathers described some of the challenges that they had experienced. The sub-themes that emerged involved health issues, stigma and challenges to understand their spouses.

Health issues

Following the death of their child, the bereaved fathers reported having strong grieving feelings after the loss, to the point that it impacted their physical wellbeing. Some reported experiencing health complications after the loss. The inability to get enough sleep and frequent dreams about the deceased child were thought to contribute to the bereaved fathers' experiences of health complications after the loss. F5 shared:

'After the loss, it was hard for me to get some sleep. When I slept, I dreamed of her [the deceased child] asking for help. I got a severe headache. My friends told me that I looked haggard. "

Similarly, F1 shared that they became sick, and the medical doctor he consulted confirmed that he was suffering from stress.

'Maybe because I was ill. I got severe gastric problems and insomnia for months. I went to see a doctor, and he said that it was because I was under so much stress and pressure.'

Some of the bereaved fathers also shared the psychological disturbances that they experienced after the loss. F6 recalled:

'After the loss, I became traumatized. When I drove and hit dried leaves, I would stop my car and I could not continue my driving. I was traumatized. I became so scared. I could not concentrate on anything. It was dangerous.'

Similarly, F12 shared:

'It was hard. I almost became insane. I could not stay in my home. I kept thinking what if, what if... I almost considered suicide. Then I met with a shaman to get alternative medication to heal my wound, but nothing has changed.'

Some of the bereaved fathers shared challenges that they experienced in their social life, specifically with their spouses. A bereaved father (F6) shared the difficulties he had speaking and having a normal relationship with his wife after the loss.

'The relationship with my wife was bad. It was difficult to talk to her. I blamed her for the loss and so did she. We took a year to talk like normal again. With other people, I avoided meeting with them. I was not ready.'

Some bereaved fathers shared their inability to work after the loss. F5 shared:

'I did not go to work for two years. I could not. I could not concentrate and my job in the army needed me to be alert all the time. Therefore, I decided to quit my job.'

With the inability to go to work, some bereaved fathers reported experiencing financial difficulties. Even with support from friends, the strong missing feeling had defeated the bereaved fathers' spirit to work and move on with their life. F10 shared:

'I could not work. I was having a bad financial crisis in that time. I could not work because I missed him so much. I could not be at home either. There were friends who came to my house and I shared my problem with them. They asked me to forgive, but I could not. Before the incident, I considered myself as a wealthy person, but after that, no more. Even until now.'

Stigma

After the loss, some of the bereaved fathers also reported experiencing stigma from other people who questioned their parenting style. F7 shared:

'I know that some people were talking badly about me. I heard from one of my friends that there were

people who accused us of being bad parents. That we did not supervise him. I just remained in silence and never confronted or discussed my loss with anyone."

Some associated their loss with a punishment from God. F9 shared:

Some of my friends told me that the loss happened because God wanted to punish me. I felt terrible after listening to their statements.'

To make the fathers' grief more complicated, some of the bereaved fathers reported receiving comments from other people who expected them to be strong. This expectation from others forced the bereaved fathers to hide their grieving feelings for the sake of their spouses. F1 shared:

'People expected me to recover rapidly. My father-in-law told me that I had to be strong, otherwise my wife would feel worse. So I believed that I needed to hide my feelings and act' to be strong.'

Challenge to understand spouses

All of the bereaved fathers noticed challenges in the form of difficulties in gaining mutual understanding with their spouses and to understand each other's coping styles. F8 said:

'My wife loved to ask, why, why and why. I understood that women loved to ask but I had enough. I told her to stop asking and just accept the loss. This incident happened because of fate that has been written by God. I felt so stressful when she kept asking me.'

As a result, some bereaved fathers reported preferring spending their time with their friends, which subsequently led to neglecting their spouses. F6 shared:

'I went out and joined a badminton group. I realized that I was neglecting my wife. However, I could not stay at home. I missed my child and I hated it when my wife asked me questions and tried to bring up any discussion about the loss.'

Life after the loss

There are three sub-themes that emerge from this theme, related to the feeling of emptiness and blaming, growth post-loss, and the fathers' on-going relationship.

The feeling of emptiness and blaming

All of the bereaved fathers agreed that their life was never the same again. Some bereaved fathers noticed a feeling of emptiness because of the loss. F7 shared:

'He always followed me. There were times when my friends told me that my son was like my colleague, but now he is gone. I felt like, I do not know how to say it. So sad, so empty. Life is never the same again.'

Some bereaved fathers described missing their child when they sometimes remembered the routine that they had had when their deceased child was still alive. In addition, some locations also brought back memories of their deceased child. F3 remarked:

'When I got back to work, I sometimes went to her school. I waited for her, but then I realized that she was gone. I cried. I stood under the tree where she waited for me after school. I miss her so badly. Sometimes, I could still hear her voice. I felt like she was still with me. But [the deceased daughter] is not dead. She is still here, in our house.'

Some bereaved fathers described that their feelings towards the wrongdoers responsible for their child's death made them feel worse. Mixed feelings of anger, dissatisfaction, grievance and an expectation that the wrongdoers needed to seek forgiveness from them made the grieving process more difficult. F2 shared:

'I am suffering. People said that after some time the grieving would be better, but not for me. It worsens every day. Even until now, I am still hoping that the wrongdoer will come and ask for forgiveness, but nothing has happened. If it is possible, I want him to come and see me. To see what he has done to my life and apologize.'

Similarly, F4 described his vengeful feelings concerning the death of his child.

'Even though the court had announced that the murderer was mentally ill, I could not accept it. If he was mentally ill, why did he have a driving license? Why did he kill my daughter? She was only nine years old. She did not do any mistakes to other people. He did not just kill my daughter, but also my dreams, my hopes and my memories. Even until now, I feel uneasy. I feel pain. If possible, I want to kill him with my own hands.'

Some bereaved fathers reported blaming their spouses for their ignorance that led to the death of their child. F10 shared,

'Somehow, I feel like my kid would never have died if my wife had taken better care of him.'

Some bereaved fathers reported experiencing a dilemma whether to stay vengeful or to forgive. This situation arose as the bereaved fathers felt that forgiveness is encouraged in religious teaching. F2 shared:

'I know that I cannot feel revenge towards the offender, I must forgive because Islam teaches me to forgive. However, it is not that simple. If we really want to follow Islamic teaching, then the offender must come and ask for forgiveness. Yet he never came. Therefore, how can I forgive him?'

Similarly, F8 explained:

'In Islam, forgiveness is the best course. However, there are certain punishment to follow. Qisas [retaliation in kind], specifically.'

F3 added:

'I cannot look at the offender's face. Even when we were in the court. He [the offender] never showed signs of feeling regretful for what he had done. I know Islam teaches us to forgive, but it is hard. Maybe one day I can forgive him. I pray to God to be able to forgive him, but not today. Not now.'

Growth post-loss

All of the bereaved fathers repeatedly emphasized the role of religion in influencing their grieving process. F1 shared how he found tranquility through the religious motivational words that he received from other people. In addition, religious motivational words were described as being the most helpful form of support that he expected from others:

'I really needed religious motivational words. Only that can sooth me. Other words or actions were not helping at all. I wanted people to share narrations from previous Prophets who had also lost their kids. I wanted to be as strong as them.'

With the support and belief in their religion, some bereaved fathers reported becoming a better person after the loss. F2, for example, shared how he changed after the loss:

'Before my child died, I was busy with my work. I believed that working was everything for me. Since my kid died, I have changed. I have become closer to my family. We eat and pray together. Somehow I feel like I am closer to God. I am better now.'

F5 also recounted how he has gained more appreciation towards his family:

'After the loss, I realized that I needed to spend more time with my family. They are everything to me. Before this [the loss], maybe I did not realize what was important to me. After the loss, I realized that life was short. I wanted to spend it with my family.'

Some bereaved fathers described having gained strength through the future plans that they have. Most cited their other children, family and career as ways to gain strength. F3 shared:

'I need to be strong. My family and children are my motivation. They are the reason I am still breathing now. I want to spend my time with them when I am old. We plan to explore together. I want to cycle with my wife. Apart from that, I know my responsibility as a worker. My career is important. It keeps me busy and helps me forget about the loss, but only temporarily.'

F6 also shared how he drew happiness from his other children as strength for him to get through his grieving process.

'I borrow the smile from my kids. I enjoy seeing them laugh. Kids are always happy. That helps me move on with my life.'

Ongoing relationship

All of the bereaved fathers described a never-ending relationship with their deceased child. This was illustrated when the bereaved fathers consistently mentioned their dreams to meet their child in heaven and performing certain religious-based activities which they believed were beneficial to their deceased child. F1 shared:

'Every start has its end, but every end will start again. I believe that my child is waiting in heaven with a drink for me. This is also written in the Quran. He will be my child forever. Every time I remember him, I will recite verses from the Quran which I want to give to him as a gift.'

Discussion

The objective of this study was to understand the experiences of bereaved fathers before, during, and after their loss. Through the in-depth interviews conducted with bereaved fathers, the study presents the experiences of bereaved Malay fathers post-loss. Compared with the literature on bereaved fathers that describes fathers as strong and insensitive (Versalle & MacDowell, 2005), this study found that bereaved fathers experienced tremendous loss, and some described losing part of themselves.

Although these fathers experienced difficulties in accepting the news of their child's death, their reports show how religion has influenced their grieving process. Bereaved fathers described religion as a grounding that they hold onto to prevent extreme responses after their loss. Rather than extreme reactions such as wailing, the bereaved fathers reminded themselves about what religion has taught them and reacted accordingly. This was also why the bereaved fathers were able to control themselves, and refrain from expressing their true grieving feelings. However, it has to be emphasized that drawing from the responses, a controlled expression of grief does not necessarily equal having weak feelings post-loss.

One of the most salient responses in regard to the challenges bereaved fathers faced was the stigma they perceived from society. Stigma, shame and concealment are responses associated with grief in relation to a violent death (Pitman, Rantell, Marston, King, & Osborn, 2017). After a violent death, bereaved fathers may feel embarrassed and have a fear of appearing as socially incompetent. The bereaved fathers in this study reported feeling judged by their society for being unable to protect their child from death. This will have a greater impact on bereaved fathers who live in a collectivistic culture, as in a collectivistic culture interdependence and group harmony are seen as fundamental to each individual (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Rather than confronting society, silence was described as a course of action that bereaved fathers chose to prevent any undesired consequences.

In the data, it was felt that people expect bereaved fathers to have full supervision of their children, and as such believed that the deaths were in some way a result of the bereaved fathers' negligence. This is another challenge that bereaved fathers experience that requires further investigation, given that it may add more stress to the bereaved father's life after their loss. Even though Malay people abide by their religion (Oka, et al., 2017) and believe that what happens is a fate decided by God, they still experience difficulty reconciling their emotions and their beliefs where traumatic death is unpreventable.

The bereaved fathers also reported having feelings of dissatisfaction, blame and holding a grudge towards the wrongdoers who had caused the death of their child. To avoid using these terms, bereaved fathers raised an issue related to forgiveness towards the wrongdoers. This study reported that there was a possibility where the bereaved fathers may be torn between their devotion to God and having an unforgiving tendency towards the wrongdoers. Forgiveness, even for the most atrocious offences, has been emphasized as a value Muslims should carry in their life, and the importance of forgiveness is clearly stated in the holy Quran: 'let them forgive and show indulgence. Yearn ye not that Allah may forgive you? Allah is forgiving, Merciful' (Al Noor, 22). In order to forgive the wrongdoers,

the bereaved fathers raised the importance of the wrongdoers seeking forgiveness from the bereaved fathers and the implementation of *qisas*. The *qisas* punishment for crimes includes those involving intentional wounding and intentional killing. According to *qisas*, in such crimes the victims play a central role in both prosecution and punishment. The victims of *qisas*-related crimes are given a choice as to the punishment that will be imposed. They may choose to forgive the defendant and demand no punishment at all, or they may demand a payment known as '*diyya*' (restitution). In the context of the current study, bereaved fathers reported that the death penalty was the only restitution deserved by such wrongdoers.

Nevertheless, there were also bereaved fathers who wished to forgive the wrongdoers, and this is consistent with the characteristics of a collectivistic culture which stresses the importance of harmony in society (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This finding raises the importance of identifying issues or challenges that bereaved fathers may experience after the death of their child, and to try to solve them by confronting the challenges. In this situation, it is vital for bereaved fathers to have a channel which enables them to meet with the wrongdoers and offer a resolution to their dissatisfaction. In more serious cases, bereaved fathers need to be included in court decisions so that they can understand the decision that is made and help to alleviate any dissatisfaction felt towards the judicial system. On the other hand, bereaved fathers also underscored their post-growth experiences after the death of their child, and this is consistent with literature which has found positive growth in grief (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). In this study, the positive growth experienced after the death of a child has a significant relationship with religious belief. The religious belief assists the bereaved fathers to make sense of their loss. One of the ways this transpires is for them to be able to compare their situation with previous prophets. Rather than manifesting their loss as a punishment from God (Pargament & Park, 1995), the bereaved fathers in this study believed that the loss of a significant other is a test from God to test their love towards their religion. As mentioned in a verse in Quran,

'Verily, We shall put you to test with some fear, and hunger, and with some loss of wealth, lives, and offspring. And (O Muhammad) convey good tidings to those who are patient, who say, when inflicted by hardship, "Verily we are of God and verily to Him shall we return;" upon them is the blessings of Allah and His mercy.' (2:155).

Additionally, religion also helps bereaved fathers to believe in a continuous bond with their deceased child and to be more acceptant towards the death. This has been raised in past literature which has found positive

relationships between religion-spirituality and the adjustment to bereavement, particularly if observed over time (e.g. Becker et al., 2007; Hays & Hendrix, 2008). These findings explain the influence of religion in fathers' grief and the positivity that religion provides in assisting fathers' grief.

After the death of their child, bereaved fathers can come to appreciate their family better. In fact, the bereaved fathers in this study also described gaining more strength after their loss. This becomes visible in that after the difficulties, some of the bereaved fathers in this study have been able to understand themselves better, together with influential factors such as coping styles, motivations, religion, and sources of support that help them to strengthen their coping ability and finally find strength from their loss.

It is acknowledged that this study has some limitations. First, the number of respondents in this study is small, which leads to an inability to generalize the reported bereavement experiences to a wider population. In addition, this study also involved a homogeneous population of Malay Muslim fathers. This therefore urges further investigations involving bereaved fathers in more heterogeneous populations to be carried out, in order to better understand bereavement journey among bereaved fathers in a deeper and richer way.

Limitations of this study

This study involved only Malay bereaved fathers and considered only traumatic deaths. We were therefore only able to gather limited numbers of respondents. At the same time, we only consider traumatic deaths as we wanted to look at this issue in-depth, feeling it was worth greater study. Only the social media platform Facebook was used to get the respondents. This limitation occurred as there is no bereavement centre dealing with traumatic death in Malaysia. This made it difficult for the researchers to gain information about the respondents. Looking at these limitations, a sampling using a social media platform was chosen to gain accessibility to get the respondents.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the bereavement experiences of bereaved fathers after the death of their child. In addition to masculinity, religious belief and culture are seen as important elements that influenced their bereavement journey. Even though religion provided positive effects and a coping mechanism for the bereaved fathers, their inability to differentiate between the need to express their feelings of grief and the need to control their feelings due to religious teaching may lead to conflict within themselves and with other people. Additionally, culture influences bereaved fathers to act in a more perceived masculine way, and the visibility of their actions and reactions may also lead to societal stigma. This is also consistent with

previous research on understanding family deaths in Senegal that found challenges in explaining the complexities of translating and interpreting the emotions in varied cultural backgrounds (McCarthy, Evans, & Bowlby, 2019). These findings indicate that bereaved fathers may need support and a channel through which to share their grief. This study highlights the importance of conducting further studies related to men and bereavement, especially in understanding the forms of support they need from the perspectives of various cultural backgrounds. ■

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