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UCT research explores Muslim fatherhood beyond stereotypes in Hanover Park

Aneeqah Meyer Photo: Boikhutso Ntsoko

Fatherhood is often measured by whether a man provides for his family. But for some fathers, being a good parent also means learning to express affection they rarely experienced growing up, balancing financial pressures with emotional involvement and raising children according to their religious beliefs.

Research by a University of Cape Town (UCT) master's student Aneeqah Meyer explored these complexities through interviews with 10 Muslim fathers in Hanover Park on the Cape Flats. Her findings highlight how financial insecurity, religion, inherited ideas about masculinity and South Africa's history of inequality shape men's experiences of fatherhood.

Meyer is completing a Master of Social Science in Gender and Transformation in UCT's Department of African Feminist Studies. Her research seeks to move beyond stereotypes about fathers in working-class communities by examining how men understand their responsibilities and relationships with their children.

"One of the key findings was that fatherhood is shaped by a constant negotiation between material provision, authority and emotional involvement," explained Meyer.

The fathers she interviewed viewed financial provision as a central responsibility, but they also recognised the importance of being emotionally present. "The difficulty was that these responsibilities did not always feel compatible, particularly when they were dealing with financial insecurity or trying to meet their families' needs," she said.

For some, being unable to provide everything their children needed brought feelings of guilt and personal failure, even when financial difficulties were shaped by circumstances beyond their immediate control.

Meyer said the findings showed that the pressures of fatherhood are not only financial, but also emotional and psychological.

When fathers struggle to express affection

One of the study's findings concerned how experiences of fatherhood are passed between generations.

Some participants grew up in households where affection and vulnerability were rarely expressed. As fathers, they wanted to be emotionally involved with their children but sometimes struggled to show love in ways they had not experienced as children.

Meyer described one father who grew up with a parent who did not openly express affection through hugs or verbal declarations of love. As an adult, he struggled to respond when his child approached him affectionately.

The account illustrated how ideas about masculinity can be transmitted through everyday family life, including what children do not see or experience.

The research found that some fathers wanted to do things differently than their own fathers. However, the desire to be more emotionally available did not automatically make it easy to move beyond familiar expectations of male authority and emotional restraint.

Faith shapes ideas about good fatherhood

The study found that Islam also played an important role in shaping participants' understanding of parenting and responsibility. Some struggled to separate their understanding of what it means to be a good Muslim from what it means to be a good father, seeing religious duty and family responsibility as closely connected.

Participants discussed teaching their children Islamic principles, encouraging prayer, demonstrating appropriate conduct and leading by example. They also viewed protecting their children as an important part of fatherhood, including guiding them through decisions about smoking, alcohol, early pregnancy and other influences they considered harmful.

For some, faith provided a moral framework for parenting and emotional grounding when they struggled to meet their own expectations.

Meyer cautioned, however, against assuming that Islam determines how all Muslim fathers behave. Her research focused on how the men she interviewed interpreted and practised their faith in their particular circumstances.

Beyond the absent-father narrative

The interviews challenge simplistic portrayals of men in township communities as lazy, dangerous or emotionally absent. The fathers spoke about their children's futures, their responsibilities and the kind of men they hoped their children would become.

But Meyer does not suggest that these accounts present an entirely positive picture of fatherhood. Some of the practices described by participants continued to reinforce conventional expectations regarding authority, discipline and emotional restraint.

"These men were not a homogeneous group, and their experiences did not fit neatly into categories of either good or bad fatherhood," she said. "Some practices challenged dominant expectations, while others reproduced them."

The research also situates fathers' experiences within South Africa's broader social and economic conditions. Poverty, insecure employment, class inequality and the enduring effects of apartheid's spatial planning influence the opportunities available to families in working-class communities such as Hanover Park.

Meyer stressed that acknowledging these structural barriers does not excuse harmful behaviour or remove individual responsibility. Rather, it helps explain why family relationships cannot be understood through individual choices or statistics alone.

"Statistics alone cannot tell us how men understand fatherhood, how they relate to their children or what shapes their ability to participate in family life," she concluded.

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