

Premarital first-time fatherhood among young Muslim men in Cape Town

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## Abstract

There is a paucity of research on the impact of religion in shaping fathering practices and experiences, both in South Africa and the rest of the world. Substantially less is known about the outcomes of premarital fatherhood for young Muslim men who experience fathering through the intersection of Islamic laws and cultural customs in South Africa. This study aimed to address this research gap. Using non-probability purposive sampling, eight young Muslim men, between the ages of 18 and 25, who fathered a child out of wedlock in the past five years were recruited to participate in the study. Data was collected using a semi-structured interview and verbatim transcripts were analyzed using thematic narrative analysis. Four themes emerged; (a) reactions to fatherhood, (b) constructions of fatherhood, (c) impact of premarital fatherhood, and (d) masculinity in Islam. The young men reacted with shock, fear, and stress to impending fatherhood. Their perceptions of fatherhood entailed assuming responsibility to provide, particularly financially. Pressure, expectations, and sacrifice were narrated as the challenges of young fatherhood. The ability to successfully co-parent was mediated by their relationship with the birth mother. Religion and culture shaped the young fathers' caregiving practices and played a significant role in their reactions to, and constructions of, fatherhood. This study contributes to existing research on young fatherhood by providing knowledge from the Islamic perspective that may inform future comparative studies seeking to investigate differences across religion and culture. Findings may assist in developing insightful, effective support programs for young Muslim fathers.

Keywords: fatherhood, Islam, masculinity, Muslim, premarital, young

Unplanned parenthood remains a significant issue in South Africa constituting socio-economic concern as well as imposing additional health and educational challenges for young adults (Panday, Makiwane, Ranchod, & Letsoala, 2009). To address this pertinent issue, research has been geared toward studying young mothers while substantially less is known about the outcomes of unplanned young fatherhood (Madiba & Nsiki, 2017).

Traditional gender norms have influenced parenting, predetermining and placing emphasis on the maternal role as the primary caregiver of emotional and physical care, while considering fathers as mere financial providers (Morrell, 2006). Where research on fathers exists, it is typically generated from an account of mothers (Madiba & Nsiki, 2017). Society conceptualises fathers, and more specifically young fathers, as less involved than their maternal counterparts while enforcing traditional masculinity. As such, young men are less often the focus of parenting interventions or support services (Davies, 2016). Consequently, the voice of the young father remains unheard. Young fathers, in relation to the birth mother, experience their own personal development while attempting to navigate their way through parenthood and adjust to new life as a father (Chideya & Williams, 2013). The proposed study seeks to explore experiences of unplanned premarital fatherhood among young Muslim men, and as such, recognises the importance of sociocultural factors in shaping how fatherhood is understood and performed.

The following sections outline the significance of researching fatherhood and more specifically, the experience of being a young father. Within this discussion, I highlight the various challenges affecting fatherhood; provide a brief discussion on the ways in which socio-cultural factors, and more specifically religion shapes experiences of fatherhood; and finally,

discuss the importance of exploring the lived experiences of premarital fatherhood for young men in Islam.

### **The importance of researching young fatherhood**

Previous literature on fatherhood portrays young fathers as ‘absent’, uninterested, irresponsible and incapable of providing for their offspring (Clapton, 2009; Johansson & Hammarén, 2014). Consequently, young fathers were viewed as incompetent of positively contributing to the lives of their offspring (Davies, 2016). Over the past few decades however, there has been an upsurge in research on young fatherhood as researchers have become increasingly aware of the complexities of the lived experiences of young fathers. When the societal expectations of men are experienced in relation to pre-marital fathering for young males, it creates an overwhelming number of challenges which young fathers must overcome (Devault et al., 2008). For instance, the desire and/or extent to which young fathers become involved is influenced by a variety of factors such as whether the pregnancy was planned or unplanned, the relationship with the birth mother, and the father’s intentions amongst others (Swartz & Bhana, 2009; Volker & Gibson, 2014).

Although ‘helplessness’ and ‘anxiety’ in the early days of parenthood are reported amongst both older and younger fathers, it is often accompanied by a sense of relief for the former, as support from their partner enables a smooth transition into parenthood. In contrast, young men who become fathers often face additional challenges prior to, and following, the birth of their child and lack the much-needed support that would facilitate an easier transition into parenthood (Madiba & Nsiki, 2017). It is, as such, essential to conduct research with young fathers to improve the availability, and quality, of the services directed at alleviating the pressures and anxieties that they experience (Davies, 2016).

**The challenges of young fatherhood.** In comparison to the shift to parenthood for adult men, the transition into fatherhood for young men, or adolescents, is likely to create a ‘crisis’ as it is often premarital and unplanned (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000). The accelerated transition into the responsibilities of fatherhood, often considered in many cultures as entering *adulthood*, constitutes a dilemma as young fathers attempt to integrate two identities of being a child and a parent. This often results in role confusion as some young men, being financially dependent on their parents, are required to simultaneously provide financial support for their offspring (Chideya & Williams, 2013).

Young fatherhood is associated with a range of negative life outcomes which may include increased risk of poverty, delinquency, lowered educational attainment and consequently, difficulty in sourcing employment opportunities that provide adequate earnings (Fletcher & Wolfe, 2012). Based on a study investigating the relationship between poverty and the experiences of teenage fatherhood in South Africa, black and coloured<sup>1</sup> young fathers reported leaving school to assume financial responsibility which took “priority status” and was considered to be a respectable masculine practice (Swartz & Bhana, 2009, p. 50). Providing a detailed account of their experiences, frequent reports of anxiety and fear were narrated, with impending fatherhood collectively described as being a catalyst to adulthood (Swartz & Bhana, 2009).

The challenges of becoming a father for young men are further complicated by their relationship with the birth mother, the extent to which they are able to co-parent successfully and whether or not they reside with the child (Madiba & Nsiki, 2017). Additional significant factors affecting experiences include the amount of support received, definitions of a ‘good father’ and

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<sup>1</sup> Black and Coloured refers to the classification of individuals as African and mixed-race as defined by the South African government during Apartheid.



whether they can meet these expectations (Swartz & Bhana, 2009). In a study conducted by Chideya and Williams (2013), almost all the young fathers defined being a good father as a measure of how successful they are in providing financial support for their child. Fulfilling this role is the foundation upon which many describe their success as fathers (Madiba & Nsiki, 2017). Although the importance of emotional and physical presence is identified in fathers' definitions of fatherhood, it is often overshadowed by the need to provide financially for offspring (Madiba & Nsiki, 2017). Themes around 'financial responsibility' and 'masculine practices' of fatherhood have consistently been described in the literature as shaped by the socio-cultural and religious expectations of men (Morrell, 2006).

**Religion and culture.** In a comprehensive analysis of the experiences of young fathers in South Africa, young black fathers described accepting 'financial duties' and adopting the role of the 'breadwinner' as culturally-enforced, and an important value within their religious belief system (Swartz & Bhana, 2009). Although similar studies have echoed these themes, and while many of those studies focus largely on culture, very few, if any, have focused specifically on religion. As a result, the literature search yielded limited studies investigating the intersection of religion, masculinity and fatherhood.

In order to gain a comprehensive and holistic understanding of young fatherhood, it is essential to consider all aspects that may influence fathering practices. Although culture is a significant factor in shaping behaviour and perspectives, individuals perform cultural traditions in accordance with their religious beliefs (Stewart & Lozano, 2009). Religion and culture are therefore interconnected, as researchers cannot understand an individual's religious faith without observing the culture within which the religion is practiced. For instance, the religion of Islam forbids premarital intercourse and reproduction however; it is within the culture of Cape Town

that young Muslims are encouraged to get married prior to the birth of the child. In this way, religion and cultural customs intersect to influence experiences of fathering for young Muslim fathers. Few studies however have been conducted with young Muslim fathers that experience fatherhood through the intersection of Islamic laws with the culture in Cape Town.

**Islam and young pre-marital fathering.** Understandings and practices of fatherhood and masculinity may be a reflection of an individual's culture, faith, society, and personal experiences (Ouzgane, 2006). An understudied area of research is young fatherhood in Islam. Central to the values of the Islamic faith is the obligation of its believers to assist in providing care for family members. Specifically, it accentuates the responsibility of the husband or father to adopt the role as the provider of sufficient support, particularly within the financial sphere, of what would be affordable for the father (Koenig & Al Shohaib, 2014). The religion of Islam considers marriage to be a sacred practice and urges its believers to abstain from engaging in premarital dating or sexual relations, such as fornication, as it is a punishable sin (Eniola, 2013; Koenig & Al Shohaib, 2014). For this reason, premarital pregnancy/child-bearing is viewed as unacceptable and is perceived as disgraceful within the Islamic community. Although there is variation in these traditional beliefs across Muslim households, young Muslim men who become fathers are raised with these core understandings, significantly shaping their experiences of fatherhood (Koenig & Al Shohaib, 2014).

An examination of the existing literature revealed few studies with young Muslim fathers, indicative of the dearth of information available on the experiences of this population. In order to gain insight into the various factors that interact to shape practices and perspectives of fatherhood, it is essential to address this evident gap in the research, which is what this study seeks to do.

## Theoretical Framework

Within Islam, the expectations of fatherhood and notions of masculinity are found within the extracts of the Holy Qur'an and these beliefs are encountered globally as religious standards. However, there may be cultural customs specific to the Islamic culture within Cape Town that cannot be generalized to the global practices of Islam. In addition, fathering perspectives and practices are significantly mediated by a range of social factors and societal expectations of masculinity that are socially constructed and continue to be imposed on young fathers. 'Young fatherhood' will be viewed and understood within a social constructionist epistemological framework as the young men exist, and interact, within a socially constructed reality in which their beliefs and practices are social creations (Wilson & MacLean, 2011).

Social constructionism is a qualitative theory of knowledge that is centered around exploring certain concepts, ideas or beliefs, known as *social constructs*, that are collectively held by members of a given society (Galbin, 2014). The development of a social construct is thought to emerge from the tendency of society to categorize individuals according to their differences and formulate ideas or assumptions about people in those categories. Young fathers are often subjected to negative stereotypical roles which, in relation to their religious faith, may create a reality that the framework aims to explore.

The key aspect of this perspective is examining how young Muslim fathers use language as a tool to construct their identity and make sense of the self. Utilizing the social constructionist framework enables the researcher to examine how the young fathers position themselves within a sociocultural context. It is therefore only through the social constructionist lens that it may gain meaning and make a significant contribution to the way that young fathers are represented or characterized in society.

## **Aims and Objectives**

The present study aims to explore the lived experiences of young Muslim fathers in Cape Town. It seeks to gain in-depth insight into the challenges that arise when young Muslim men father a child out of wedlock and how this shapes experiences of fatherhood. As such, the study seeks to ask the following research question: How does religion, Islam to be specific, shape the practices and experiences of premarital fathering for young men in Cape Town. Sub-questions explore how young Muslim men construct fatherhood at the intersection of their religion and culture. This study seeks to obtain accounts as it occurs within the first few years of fathering, as exploring current experiences or events facilitates a greater amount of detailed data to emerge (Babbie & Mouton, 1998).

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

Qualitative research is a methodological approach that aims to gain in-depth knowledge and comprehensive understanding of phenomena within specific contexts (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). In order to understand how young Muslim fathers construct their identity and perform fatherhood, the researcher made a considerable attempt to view experiences through the lens of the respondent (Babbie & Mouton, 2001).

As the present study focuses on exploring young fatherhood in Islam, the phenomenological qualitative research design provides a suitable framework in which the experiences of this population can be investigated. Seeking to obtain accounts directly from the father, the study highlights the importance of the insider's perspective in generating in-depth insight into the sample. Qualitative research allows the researcher to accentuate the individuality of participants' experiences as well as providing the researcher with the tools to identify common

themes and patterns within the overall data (Maxwell, 2008). Adopting this approach enables the unique narratives and lived experiences of a sample of young Muslim fathers to emerge.

### **Sampling**

In order to obtain a sample for the present study, a non-probability purposive sampling technique was employed. Purposive sampling entails sampling participants in a deliberate manner by selecting informants who meet specific salient criteria and reflect the sample that the researcher is interested in (Babbie & Mouton, 2001).

Based on its aims and objectives, the study sought to recruit at least ten ( $n = 10$ ) young men, between the ages of 18 and 25, who practice Islam, and have fathered a child out of wedlock. Only men who fathered a child within the past five years were eligible to participate in the study. This study was interested in obtaining subjective in-depth experiences of young Muslim fathers and as such, a smaller number of participants was satisfactory. Furthermore, within the scope and timeframe of the study, a small sample size was effective as it allowed a substantial amount of 'rich' data to emerge (Babbie & Mouton, 2001).

Participants were recruited using an advertisement (Appendix D) that was circulated to mosques in the Kensington community. In addition, the advertisement was announced on the local Islamic radio station, *Voice of the Cape*, thereby extending the invitation to young Muslim men across communities in Cape Town. However, as the initial phase yielded few participants, the snowball sampling technique was applied in which the social networks of the accessible cohort of participants were used to gain access to additional participants that met the criteria. Eight ( $n = 8$ ) participants were recruited using this method. As a result of the small sampling pool, some of the participants were known to me. The mixture of purposive and snowball sampling was rigorous and well-suited for the present research.

### **Data collection procedure**

To uncover in-depth knowledge on the lived experiences of young Muslim fathers, the study employed a semi-structured interview comprising of a range of open-ended questions. As each participant responded during the interview in a manner that reflected their understanding, the researcher was able to obtain a diverse set of accounts that was rich in detail (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Zohrabi (2013) further highlights that using open-ended questions are effective as it is less restrictive thus allowing respondents to reveal valuable information beyond the scope of the question.

Each interview lasted between 10 – 60 minutes. The interview was carried out at a location that was mutually agreed upon by both the researcher and each participant to ensure safety and comfort. Prior to the interview, each participant was required to read and sign the informed consent form. The interview guide (Appendix B) included questions probing participants to describe their experience as a young Muslim father and the ways in which their religious beliefs and practices have influenced these experiences.

### **Data analysis**

An analysis of narratives was conducted using a thematic narrative analysis. By using a thematic analytical tool in the process of analysis, the researcher was able to efficiently organize the data in a manner that facilitates easy interpretation (Babbie & Mouton, 2001).

The present study followed Riessman's (2008) guidelines for conducting a thematic narrative analysis. Prior to examining the data for patterns and searching for meaning, the researcher was required to engage in a process of 'immersion' whereby they intensively and repeatedly read the data to ensure that they are familiar with the thematic content (Riessman, 2008). In this first step of the analytic process, the researcher read the data thrice, noting

potential themes across the set of narratives as they emerge. Within a codebook, the researcher inscribed preliminary codes based on conspicuous and significant elements of the data that was found to be the most valuable for the purpose of the study. These ‘draft’ themes or codes were used as a means to organize the large amount of data. To provide a concise interpretation, the initial themes were subsequently reviewed by the researcher who combined a number of comparable subthemes to form main themes. By evaluating initial themes, the researcher was able to discard themes considered irrelevant for the interpretation of the data or refine themes that needed clarification.

As the data was organized into a range of descriptive and defined themes, the researcher was able to map common discourses that emerged in the interview and provide a holistic interpretation of the lived experiences of the sample of young Muslim fathers. As an additional step to analysis, the researcher considered the impact of the broader sociocultural context in which the meanings of experiences were embedded.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Issues surrounding ethics and moral principles are likely to be encountered when carrying out social research as researcher’s risk designing and implementing procedures that may appear intrusive to participants (Punch, 2005a). With the current study focusing on attaining an in-depth understanding of the experiences of young fatherhood among young Muslim men, it was important to recognize and adhere to a range of ethical standards. The study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee in the Psychology Department at the University of Cape Town (Appendix E).

### **Confidentiality and privacy**

One reason a participant may withhold information is due to the stigma surrounding the expression of emotions as a 'man' (Morrell, 2006). Taking these concerns into account, each participant was assigned a pseudonym that ensured anonymity of their identity. By placing the data within password-protected folders that could only be accessed by the researcher and supervisor, each participant was also reassured that their information was kept confidential.

### **Informed consent**

The informed consent form (Appendix A) was used to explicitly outline the nature, purpose, and procedure of the study. It functioned to ensure that participants had a clear understanding of objectives and approaches that the study undertook (Punch, 2005a). In addition to briefing participants of the potential risks and benefits of the study, it emphasized the right of a participant to withdraw at any point devoid of penalty. The document accentuated the usage of an audio recording device for the duration of the interview, though informing participants that the recording may be terminated if at any point they were to request it.

### **Harm to subjects**

The study encompassed no form of deception or harm but recognized the unintentional emotional distress that may arise from in-depth exploration of sensitive issues within participant's experiences. Participants seeking additional support were referred to appropriate counselling services. Although the study may have evoked emotional discomfort, it benefitted both the researcher and participants as it not only allowed in-depth insight to emerge but served as a vessel through which the participants expressed their experiences.

### **Limitations**

Selecting a sample of participants that represents the larger population is not a goal of qualitative research (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Although the data from a sample of eight young



men yielded a range of responses, the applicability of the findings are limited to the small group of young fathers in the study as they exist within specific socioeconomic and geographical backgrounds. Findings therefore yield a limited, though detailed, contribution to the knowledge of young Muslim fathers in Cape Town. In providing insight into the experiences of the sample, the research findings can be used to inform support programs and supplement future research exploring the experiences of fatherhood across cultures in Cape Town.

### **Reflexivity**

Researchers must engage in a process of self-reflection whereby they review their position within the study (Maxwell, 2008). This process entails examining the way in which one's personal actions and conceptual beliefs, as well as the dynamic of the participant-researcher relationship, influence the research outcomes (Berger, 2015). Acknowledging one's positionality within the complexity of the research ensures that the study preserves some form of rigor.

In examining the personal influence of the researcher, I acknowledge that there may be researcher bias during the analytic process. To avoid giving preference to data which are synonymous with preconceived ideas, I constantly re-evaluated and challenged any pre-existing assumptions (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Although the interpretation of the data reflects my understanding, by transcribing the interviews verbatim I ensured that analysis of the data reflects the language of the participants thereby allowing their experiences to be represented during interpretation (Punch, 2005b). Furthermore, aspects of my identity, such as my gender and faith, may have influenced the responses of the participant (Berger, 2015).

Contrary to my concern, the young male participants did not perform traditional masculinity despite being interviewed by a young woman, as majority of the young men were

willing to express their vulnerability and share their feelings regarding the pressures and challenges of being a young father. As both myself and the respondent belong to the Islamic faith, I feared that the young Muslim men may project certain beliefs based on a kind of 'religious' desirability bias. However, several participants openly disclosed personal information that contradicted religious beliefs. Furthermore, sharing a religious faith enabled me to connect with the respondent using religious terms throughout the interview, making participants feel well-understood. Notably, being a young female researcher did pose as a challenge to my understanding of the responsibilities placed on the young men in the study. Namely one participant appeared bothered during the interview as he struggled to express himself to someone in my position.

In reflecting on the dynamic of the relationship with the respondent, I recognize that having a pre-existing relationship with some of the participants may have influenced the responses shared by informants. Researcher-respondent familiarity facilitated rich and detailed accounts to emerge as respondents may have felt comfortable communicating with someone they know. However, participants may have also withheld information or felt reluctant to disclose valuable material as they feared being judged or were too familiar with the researcher which may have acted as a hindrance to the study. Most of the participants appeared seemingly comfortable to confide in the researcher. One participant in particular requested counselling from me after the interview, depicting the trust and bond that was formed between the researcher and the respondent during the data collection process. As counselling is beyond my qualification, I referred the participant to counselling services (Appendix C).

The young men were enthusiastic to participate in the study as they viewed it as an opportunity to redefine fatherhood for the population of young fathers.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

The present study explored the experiences of premarital fatherhood amongst young Muslim men in Cape Town. The findings show that the experiences and perceptions of fatherhood were largely shaped by religion. It is evident however that sociocultural factors, such as traditional gender norms and role expectations exert an influence on the performance of young fatherhood. Data analysis generated four central themes which include: reactions to fatherhood, constructions of fatherhood, the impact of early premarital fatherhood, and masculinity in Islam.

### **Reactions to Fatherhood**

Similar reactions were noted amongst the young men when finding out that they were going to become a father. Reactions were centered around subthemes of negative emotions experienced regarding impending fatherhood, parental expectations and responses, as well as the influence of religion.

**Negative emotional responses.** Fatherhood was unexpected for the young men who were made aware of the pregnancy from their girlfriends, or ex-girlfriends. The young men were overwhelmed by the news which induced intense emotions of shock, denial, fear, stress, and dismay. This is supported by the following statements:

*I was overwhelmed, shocked and fearful of if I could become a father...because I was still young... (Faek, 21, unmarried, employed)*

*I felt lost, I had no direction at all in life ... so life came crumbling down on me (Amka, 23, married, employed)*

*I was scared and wanted to run away (Zumo, 21, engaged, studying)*

These responses were well-articulated amongst the young men after their realization of the full-impact of the pregnancy. The negative emotional reaction occurred in response to having fathered a child at a young age in addition to feeling unprepared to perform fatherhood. Many of the young men were concerned about their capability to provide and fulfill expectations of fatherhood. This was highlighted in the following quotes:

*I didn't know what was the requirements... tools to become a good father (Faek, 21)*

*I found out 2 months before she give birth... I literally had 2 months to prepare... I had everything going for me and then boom...just like that (Abar, 22)*

These reactions suggest that the young men were unsuspecting of the pregnancy and thus ignorant of the consequences of early sexual activity and the risk of fathering a child. The pregnancy appeared to spark a realization of the consequences of their actions. One participant was in disbelief as he did not think that it would happen to him, illustrating a sense of denial. Sorrow often manifested as aggression amongst the young men. This masked emotions regarded as 'feminine', in line with socially constructed gender norms.

Amongst several of the young fathers, impending fatherhood created a crisis as it symbolized the end of their childhood. One father described feeling that his life was over. The young men acknowledged that they would no longer be a 'child' in that they would be required to adopt certain responsibilities. A variety of emotions, such as ambivalence and helplessness are

cited as common emotions experienced by young fathers in studies on young parenthood (Madiba & Nsiki, 2017). The negative emotional responses were largely the result of their fear of how their parents would respond.

**Parental response.** Parental response refers to the reaction of the young men's parents to the news of the pregnancy. The young men reported being distressed and anxious to tell their parents as they dreaded the wrath, disappointment, and consequences that would ensue following their parent's reactions.

*we expected our parents to be really disappointed (Mufu, 24)*

*It was hectic, I got kicked out for 6 months of the house, it wasn't pleasant for me at all (Tasa, 23)*

Being evicted exacerbated the challenges of young fatherhood. Their parents reinforced the young fathers concerns of impending fatherhood, that is, having to grow up and assume the responsibilities of parenthood and adulthood as reflected in the quote below.

*... they were telling me...you need to step up now ... my mommy didn't speak to me... my dad told me ... 'I can't hit you, I can't skell you ...you skell a child... what you did is what grown people do' (Abar, 22)*

Participants indicated that disclosing the pregnancy to their parents induced a tense atmosphere in the home. The parents of the young men were unforgiving at first but were willing

to provide guidance and assistance throughout their transition to fatherhood. Parents dealt with the shame of having a son father a child out of wedlock in the Islamic community. The fear of their parents reaction was therefore specifically due to their Islamic religious beliefs.

**Religion: ‘the weight of the sin’.** Engaging in sexual activity prior to marriage is prohibited in Islam. Sexual desires should be suppressed until marriage, after which individuals are allowed to satisfy those desires (Moosa Hassim, 2013). Being aware of these beliefs, finding out that they had impregnated someone out of wedlock affected their mental well-being. As reflected in the statements below, religion exerted an influence on the emotional state of the young fathers as they were aware of the consequences and implications of premarital fathering.

*...being Muslim, you often hear about the weight of this specific sin ...I didn't need anyone else to make me feel guilty. If you are Muslim, sinning should have an emotional and psychological effect on you (Azis, 24, unmarried)*

*In our religion we are supposed to get married and then make a child, not have sex before marriage, so I felt like a disgrace to my family, to myself (Amka, 23, married)*

*... it was tough... finding out we were having a baby out of wedlock ... coming from Islamic household's where it was obviously something that was disregarded (Mufir, 24, married)*

Premarital fatherhood is frowned upon as it reveals that the young Muslim man was engaging in sin. Due to the *weight* of the sin, there is a degree of embarrassment, guilt, and

shame associated with the act. The young men were therefore hesitant to inform their parents and community about the pregnancy. As one participant describes: *My mother was quite shocked because she didn't think I was into that 'things'.*

While these young men indicate an explicit awareness of the gravity and intolerance of engaging in sexual activity prior to marriage, they were conscious of their actions at the time. This suggests that religion played a larger role when the young men were confronted with the consequences of premarital sex, than in their decision to be sexually active before marriage. Sinning may have only affected the young men once they were aware of the pregnancy. This illustrates the change in perceptions and patterns of sex in the modern era, that may exert an influence on the sexual behaviour of young adults, over and above religious beliefs. Early sexual activity has become increasingly acceptable in modern society.

In realizing the full impact of the sin and regarding pre-marital fathering as a disgraceful act, a few of the young men grappled with the question of abortion.

*I couldn't handle it and wanted my girl to get an abortion, but I realized that's wrong and its haram (forbidden) (Zumo, 21)*

*... that's not something I want because he was already conceived in the wrong manner and not to follow up that wrong with another major wrong (Mufr, 24)*

The young men attributed negative perceptions to terminating the pregnancy as a 'solution' as it strongly contradicted their personal and Islamic beliefs and values. As abortion was not an option, majority pondered their next step in their transition to fatherhood. In

reflecting on their circumstances, some of the young men considered marrying the mother of their child. The consideration of marriage was in part due to their religious beliefs. This was reflected in the following quotes:

*Well, you know in Islam that if you make a girl pregnant then you should get married right away (Zumo, 21)*

*...because I'm from a Muslim background I did think it would be expected of me to get married (Mufir, 24)*

Although not explicitly prescribed in the Holy Quran, entering marriage after fathering a child out of wedlock is recommended in many societies, including Cape Town, to correct the wrongdoing of premarital child bearing. These beliefs are evident in several of the young fathers narratives as reflected in their belief that marriage was expected or as one young father put forward:

*I'm willing to get married... I was taught from a young age, you make clean where you make dirty... that was my way of cleaning it (Abar, 22)*

Though not being ready to get married, the participant described his *willingness* to commit, that is, that he was prepared to do so in light of the circumstances. It was evident that marriage formed part of their religious beliefs. The act of marriage was not forced upon any of the young men in the study however for some, this was deemed as *the right thing to do* when



fathering a child out of wedlock. Religious beliefs were central in this study as it is assumed that these beliefs would impact and shape the young fathers perceptions and performance of fatherhood.

### **Constructions of Fatherhood**

This theme discusses how the young Muslim men understand and perceive fatherhood. Most of the young men believed that fathers should be loving, caring, and a role model for their child. The young men also regarded financial and emotional support as equally important. This finding contradicts literature reporting financial provision as priority (Bade, 2012). In constructing an image of fatherhood, the young fathers' perceptions were centred around assuming responsibility. Four categories emerged within this subtheme, namely provision, sacrifice, presence and support, as well as co-parenting, which are reflected upon in turn.

**Assuming responsibility.** The young men attempted to attain their ideal image of a good father which primarily entailed assuming responsibility.

**Provider.** The young fathers expressed the need to provide financially for their child(ren). Provision primarily encompassed satisfying the material needs of the child which mimics traditional masculinity<sup>2</sup> (Jephtha, 2014). Assuming the role of the provider was further driven by underlying religious beliefs.

*...I went to see someone because I had no knowledge about having a daughter .... the most important thing that I remember was that you need to provide (Faek, 21)*

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<sup>2</sup> An external expectation constructed by society which varies across culture but typically regards men, and fathers, as responsible, unemotional, tough, and aggressive.

*Me being the GUY in this situation, I need to be the provider, we've been taught this even in religion... as the guy as the father... I need to make sure my family is seen to (Azis, 24)*

In the abovementioned quote, religion was cited as an additional factor influencing the young father's role as depicted in the use of the word 'even'; provision was constructed as motivated by societal expectations of fatherhood. Young fathers are raised in a patriarchal society that socializes them into the provider role. Perceptions of fatherhood was therefore to some extent, socially constructed.

Several of the young fathers noted the difficulty in assuming the responsibility of being a young father. They reflected on this process as entailing a great deal of sacrifice. Some deregistered from university to seek employment that would allow them to provide, while others sought additional employment. This is described below:

*... I knew that I needed to deregister at university and get a job and an income .... So that I can look after my child and wife (Azis, 24)*

*I used to work two jobs... because I thought I wasn't providing enough for them (Tasa, 23)*

The highest qualification among seven of the eight young men was matric. A few of the young fathers desired to pursue or complete their tertiary education to ensure a better future. However, they reported being unable to effectively balance their responsibilities *and* education.

Previous research has shown that the responsibilities of fatherhood often outweigh studies (Chideya & Williams, 2013). The following statement confirmed this pattern

*... it was too much to handle with a newborn baby and being married, working and attending campus (Mufr, 24)*

Findings portray that young fatherhood, particularly in Islam, entails its own set of sacrifices in terms of provision. The young fathers ability to provide financially was perceived as a marker of their success as fathers, which is in line with findings presented by Chideya and Williams (2013). This however did not overshadow their desire to be supportive and present in their child's life.

***Presence and support.*** Being physically present by offering emotional support and guidance was particularly important to the young fathers. Through the use of language, the young men attempted to reconstruct their identity, and re-position themselves in a patriarchal society. They regularly challenged the long-held societal beliefs and expectations of men, and young fathers, as uninvolved. The desire to nurture depicts the changing gender roles in society with fathers employing an increasingly active role.

*...being able to support them financially and emotionally by being there ... you can support anyone financially without being present (Mufr, 24)*

*A supportive father... that's always there for the children, that can show them love (Asca, 21)*

Active involvement was influenced by the fathers residency and relationship with the mother. Living apart from one's child compromises the ability to become involved in daily nurturing activities (Fagan & Barnett, 2003). This often took a toll on the young fathers. While despair, frustration, and grief were experienced at some point during fatherhood, it is evident that these emotions are prolonged amongst the non-residential fathers in the study.

***Co-parenting.*** Some of the young men remained in a relationship with the birth mother while others indicated that the relationship did not work out. The young men appeared to relate the quality of the relationship to their ability to successfully co-parent and become involved. Similar findings were found in studies conducted by Swartz and Bhana (2009), and Madiba and Nsiki (2017), in which the relationship with the mother of the child played a significant role in father involvement.

***Relationship fallout.*** Premarital, unplanned young parenthood exerts strain on relationships and may foster tension and interpersonal conflict, particularly if there are religious discrepancies between the mother and father, or disagreements in decision-making. Amongst the young men in the study, tension within the relationship was frequently narrated. The young fathers who were not in a relationship or married to the mother of their child increasingly engaged in arguments surrounding involvement and provision as shown in the following extracts:

*She didn't want child support. She didn't want me to be involved... I insisted I'm gonna provide for them (Asca, 21)*

*its' not civil at all... She always swears ...there's always money matters and she doesn't allow me to see my children (Tasa, 23)*

Several young men framed child maintenance as entitling them to see their child. They viewed their economic provision as holding up their end of the bargain. This may stem from internalized gender roles and underlying male superiority. In an interesting analogy, one of the participants asserted:

*I'm paying and paying but you not budging... I just stopped... no one in this world would pay for a vehicle that they are not driving. You wouldn't pay for a house you're not living in. So why must I pay for a child that I'm not getting (Abar, 22)*

Although it displays immaturity in reasoning, which may reflect age, in the context of exclusion it exemplifies the young father's struggle to co-parent. Withdrawing financial provision may be interpreted as a means to exert some form of power and control in hopes that it may result in access to his child. Through the use of language, some of the young men constructed themselves as victims.

*Mother as the 'gatekeeper'*. The mother has the ability to restrict the fathers involvement, thereby acting as the gatekeeper. The concept of 'gatekeeping' is borrowed from the work of Kurt Lewin who describes the mother as having control over the information, stories, or persons that enter the child's social system (Lewin, 1947). Non-residential young fathers in the study experienced more difficulty in seeing their child and reported that they were at the

mercy of the mother. As one participant proclaims: *It's like what she says, goes*. In describing an incident in which the birth mother controlled their access to their child, Tasa, 23 asserted:

*... there's the gate right, my daughters on the other side and wants to come to me and I cannot hold her because the mother doesn't want me to*

Restrictions to seeing the child often extended beyond the father:

*My children can't see my mother or my family or friends... all her family and friends can, but none of mine (Asca, 21)*

The young men who faced this challenge expressed the desire to spend time with their child. The young fathers were exhausted of having to constantly reason with the mother. One young father declared: *I didn't expect to live like this*. Research suggests that the mother primarily denies the father access if he fails to meet her expectations in terms of provision (Fagan & Barnett, 2003). Despite expressing adequate provision and eagerness to become involved in their child's life, several of the young men were still at some point excluded.

*Exclusion.* Being restricted or denied access to their child left the young men feeling helpless, frustrated, and inadequate.

*I can only see the child once a week for an hour... I'd like to see my child everyday if I could. I feel like what I'm doing now is just being like a part-time parent (Abar, 22)*

Exclusion resulted in several of the young men considering court as a means of attaining rights that would overpower the mother. Some of the young fathers sought advice from religious leaders regarding court, while one participant's parents encouraged him to settle the matter in a more civil manner as Muslims should refrain from engaging in conflict.

*According to Shariah my punishment is that the child should have no contact with me... her punishment is that she has to raise that child on her own... the Sheikh told her... be reasonable...so I thought I'm gonna be in the child's life. But it hasn't happened... so the Sheikh said let the court handle it (Abar, 22)*

Many of the young fathers however felt that they did not stand a chance against the mother's argument in the dispute. Similar findings were noted amongst fathers in a study conducted by Khunou (2013) in which fathers expressed being overlooked and unsupported by the court.

*she knows everything that I caught on... she can use that against me to say that I'm an unfit parent...that's why I just give her what she want (Asca, 21)*

Exclusion portrays young fathers as absent or uninterested, stereotypes that these young men intend to challenge. Denying access to the father may be unintentional on the part of the mother but exemplifies her role as the gatekeeper. By excluding the father, the mother serves to keep the father out of the child's social system. Being uninvolved or excluded significantly impacted on the emotional and mental well-being of the young fathers.

### **Impact of early premarital fatherhood**

The young fathers described being both negatively and positively affected by early fatherhood. The young men were negatively impacted by the pressure of attempting to integrate two identities of being young and assuming the responsibilities of an adult. However, they regarded their children as *blessings* and perceived their experience as positive and necessary as they matured.

**Pressure.** Finding out that they were going to become a father accelerated their transition to adulthood. It required a marked re-allocation of finances and time (Fletcher & Wolfe, 2012). The financial burden produced high levels of stress as the young men realized the consequences of unplanned fatherhood. The findings concur with Fletcher and Wolfe (2012) that early fatherhood lowers educational attainment, subsequently hindering employment opportunities.

*'the father must work the father must provide', ...in today's life you're never going to be able to attain what you want if you the only person working...I couldn't study because I needed to provide (Faek, 21)*

The expectation of marriage placed pressure on the young men to assume the responsibility of a husband and a father within Islam.

*it put pressure on the relationship... we wanted to get married...but its sooner than what we wanted ... the need to prepare yourself quickly... it's the pressure of time (Azis, 24, married)*



Several of the young fathers noted the challenge of having to co-parent and raise their child. In reflecting on this experience, one of the young fathers expressed the pressure of having to address his child's questions about their family. His daughter interacts with her peers at creche, learning that children go home to both parents while she sees her father and mother on separate occasions. Amongst some of the unmarried, non-residential young men in the study, the desire for a nuclear family prevailed.

**Changes.** In their desire to be good fathers, the young men made changes that they considered necessary for the transition. They made a concerted effort to adjust their lifestyle and mindset to include their fatherly duties.

*There was a lot of things that I had to stop doing ...my whole life had to change according to my child because there's certain responsibilities that I had to fulfill (Faek, 21)*

*No more partying... that type of lifestyle had to come to an end (Mufr, 24)*

A supportive network, consisting of family and friends, moderated the negative impact of young fatherhood for the young men. Those who lacked a support structure remained in a stage of interpersonal crisis for a longer period of time as they had to cope alone. Studies have reported social support as significantly buffering the impact of early parenthood (Fagan, Bernd, & Whiteman, 2007). It increases the young fathers resilience to perform fatherhood thereby facilitating a smoother transition.

Although fatherhood was challenging, the young men reported being transformed by their experience. Fatherhood was accompanied by a sense of maturity amongst the young fathers in the study. The young men became increasingly self-less as they prioritised their child over their personal wants and needs. The young fathers perceived their behavioural change as positive and for the better. Most of the young men therefore reflected positively on their transition to fatherhood and embraced the responsibilities of their religion. Their actions were driven by their desire to serve as positive role models and fulfill the duties of a Muslim father.

### **Masculinity in Islam**

Masculinity refers to a set of beliefs, roles, and qualities associated with men (Jephtha, 2014). The young men understood and perceived masculinity in terms of what it means to be a man within Islam, that is, to provide, protect one's family, and to ensure that they are well fed, clothed, and sheltered. The young men were geared toward assuming their 'duties' as a Muslim man and were adamant that another man should not play their role. Islamic masculinity and fatherhood was described as entailing its own duties and teachings that are distinct to the maternal role. This is reflected below:

*guys take on a more protective role because they want to feel manly... we taught in Islam that the guy has to provide for his wife and children, if his wife earns anything, that's her money, whatever you earn it's the family's money (Azis, 24)*

*the mother can't teach you as much as the father (Amka, 23)*

*As a Muslim father, it is my duty to bring her up the right way and guide my family onto the right path (Zumo, 21)*

Failing to uphold their duties had devastating effects on the self-worth of the young fathers, including those who identified as not particularly religious. This alludes that Islam influences fathering. While religion was not the sole factor shaping their experience of fatherhood, it played a significant role in shaping fatherhood. It is evident, however, that there are similarities between Islamic masculinity, and traditional masculinity. While providing financially is central in Islam, it is also considered a traditional masculine practice. Through this overlap, the perceptions and performance of fatherhood are shaped by the interplay of religion and culture.

This research was an opportunity to gain insight into the effects of religion on young fatherhood. The study proposes religion as an additional and important factor shaping the experience of young fatherhood. Findings outline a need for interventions directed toward assisting young Muslim fathers to improve the outcomes for this vulnerable population. Programmes should be directed toward reaching out to young Muslim fathers as these young men are more likely to suffer in silence. Interventions should include counselling and educating fathers on their rights. Particularly for young men who lack a support structure, programmes may provide a form of support and improve resilience. Collectively, this may prevent the development and long-term effects of depression or other mental illness that may arise when young Muslim men father a child out of wedlock.

## **Conclusion**

Less is known about the outcomes of premarital fatherhood in Islam. The present study aimed to address this gap. The challenges experienced when sampling for this population is an indication of the sensitivity of the topic. Being a young Muslim father in a patriarchal society and fathering a child out of wedlock presents unique experiences and challenges that should be recognized. It is evident that the young Muslim fathers require a space in which to discuss and overcome their challenges. Cross-cultural studies are presented as a suggestion for future research in this area. The findings may assist in developing programmes and interventions to alleviate the impact of young fatherhood for young Muslim fathers.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to express my appreciation to my supervisor, Dr. Mandisa Malinga for her constructive assistance, guidance, and mentoring throughout this year. I wish to acknowledge my parents, sister, and peers for their continuous support and encouragement in the development of my research. Finally, I would like to offer my special thanks to my participants, the young Muslim men in my study, as without them this research would not have been possible.

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Appendix A  
Informed Consent Form



**Informed Consent Form**

**University of Cape Town**

**Consent to participate in research study:**

**Premarital first-time fatherhood among young Muslim men in Cape Town**

Dear Participant,

**Study Purpose**

You are invited to take part in a research study that seeks to explore the lived experiences and perspectives of young Muslim fathers in Cape Town. This study is open to Muslim males between the ages of 18 and 25 who have fathered a child out of wedlock in the past five years. This study is conducted as part of the Psychology Honours Programme at the University of Cape Town.

**Study Procedure & Duration**

This study consists of a single phase of data collection during which each participant is interviewed by the researcher. Prior to conducting the interview, you will be required to complete and sign this consent form signifying your agreement to participate in the study. Individual interviews will be conducted at a location that is deemed convenient and safe for both the researcher and you.

This study will take approximately 60 minutes of your time. The interview will be recorded with an audio instrument.

**Possible Risks and Benefits**

There are minimal risks in this study. However, the researcher recognizes that the interview may unintentionally provoke emotional distress as it touches on potential sensitive issues. Appropriate counselling services will be made available in the event that you require emotional support. You will be issued with a form stating the information and contact details for additional services. Through conducting this research, the researcher hopes to offer you a voice for your experiences to be heard.

**Voluntary Participation**

You may refuse to participate and you are allowed to withdraw your participation **at any point** during the research study without any effect on your relationship with the University of Cape Town. You will not be penalized for your decision to withdraw.

If you complete this form in its entirety, you are providing your consent to the usage of a recording device during the interview. You are ensured that the audio recording may be terminated if **at any point** during the study you are to request it. If this were to occur, it is the obligation of the researcher to discontinue the interview. If you do not consent to the usage of an audio device to be used during the interview, you cannot participate in this study.

### **Confidentiality**

The information and data collected from this study will be kept confidential by the researcher. This consent form will be saved on a password protected file and only the researcher and supervisor will be able to access it. Analytical reports and interpretations made about this study will not identify you or any other participant. The researcher will ensure confidentiality by uploading the audio interview and subsequent transcripts into a password-protected secure folder. Upon completion of this study, the hardcopy of the documents will be destroyed. The digital copies will remain in a password locked folder that can only be accessed by the researcher. The audio recording and transcript of each participant will randomly be assigned a pseudonym in order to maintain confidentiality throughout the analytical process.

### **Questions**

If you have any study-related questions or issues, or if you do not understand the instructions or content provided on this form, please feel free to contact the researcher for more information:

Contact Zahraa Francis (082 454 7296)

Alternatively, you can contact Rosalind Adams (021 650 3417) if you have any concerns regarding aspects of the study.

If you have decided to participate in this study and you have agreed to the terms and conditions, please provide your name, signature and the date below to signify that you have given your permission to take part in this research study.

The researcher has been given permission to record the interview    Yes     No

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of research participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

Date:

Appendix B  
Interview Schedule

**General demographic/background information**

**Please tell me about yourself**

1. How old are you?
2. In which area do you currently live?
3. What is your marital status?
4. Please specify your race if you are comfortable doing so.
5. What is your highest level of education?
6. What is your current employment status?

**Please tell me about how you learnt that you were about to become a father**

1. What was it like learning that you were about to be a father?
2. How old were you at the time?
3. What were you doing at the time, studying/working?
4. What did that mean to you as a young unmarried Muslim man?
5. Did your life change at all after learning you were about to be a father? If so, how?
6. How did your family accept/deal with the news? How did others respond to the pregnancy?
7. Did your family dynamics change following the news that you were about to be a father?
8. What about your relationship with your girlfriend/partner at the time, did that change?

**Tell me about your journey into fatherhood**

1. What was it like when your child was born?
2. Did your life change after your child was born? If so, how?
3. Are you involved in your child's life?
4. What do you see your role to be in your child's life?
5. What shapes the way you think about and 'do' fatherhood?
6. Does religion play an important role in how you raise your child?

7. What are the things you do that you see as being informed by your religious beliefs?
8. Is there something else you want to share with me about your experience of becoming a father as an unmarried young man practising Islam?

### **Closing**

A. I appreciate the time you took for this interview. Do you have any further comments that may be helpful for me to know for my research report?

B. Thank you again for participating in this interview. I have gained valuable knowledge and now have a deeper understanding of what it is like to be a first-time father.

## Appendix C Debriefing form

Thank you for your participation in this study! The purpose of this research is to explore the lived experiences of young Muslim fathers. Young Muslim men, between the ages of 18 and 23, who fathered a child out of wedlock in the past five years were invited to take part in this qualitative study. During the interview, questions were asked with the aim of gaining in-depth insight into how socio-cultural and religious factors shape your understanding and practices of fathering. The findings of the interviews will be used to compile a research report that will be presented at the University of Cape Town on the 02 November 2018.

### **Referral List**

Should you feel that you'd benefit from counselling or support, there are a list of services and organizations below that you can contact.

#### **FAMSA**

An organization that recognizes all forms of family and provides counselling and support to individuals, families, parents, couples, and communities.

#### Services for young fathers:

Face-to-face counselling

Parenting skills workshops

Community outreach programmes

Fatherhood project – small groups in which men can engage with each other

Email support

#### Contact Offices

Observatory: 021 447 7951

Khayelitsha: 021 361 9098

Factreton: 021 593 8074

Website: [www.famsawc.org.za](http://www.famsawc.org.za)

#### Payment

All services are free of charge.

#### **Lifeline Western Cape**

Telephone: 021 461 1113 (if you live in Cape Town, calls are charged at the cost of a local call)

#### **South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG)**

#### **AskNelson Support Line Services**

Telephone: 0861 635 766

To contact a counsellor between 8am-8pm Monday to Sunday,  
Telephone: 011 234 4837  
24 hr. Helpline: 0800 12 13 14

## Appendix D Advertisement

Dear all,

I am an Honours student currently conducting research through the department of Psychology at the University of Cape Town. You are invited to participate voluntarily in my research study, which focuses on **first-time, premarital fatherhood in Islam**.

### Who can participate?

You can participate in this study if you:

- 1) are a **young man** between the ages of **18 and 25**
- 2) are **Muslim** i.e. practicing the religion of Islam
- 3) have **fathered** a child **out of wedlock** in the **past five years**

### What does the participation involve?

If you are eligible to participate in this study, you will need to engage with the researcher in a face-to-face interview, during which you will be required to respond in your own way to a few questions. The duration of the session will last between **45 minutes to an hour**.

### Where will this study take place?

This study will take place in a location that is mutually agreed upon by both you and the researcher.

If you are interested in participating in this study or if you have any further inquiries about the study, feel free to contact me, see the details below.

Thank you.

**Zahraa Francis** (Researcher)

Email: [FRNZAH001@uct.ac.za](mailto:FRNZAH001@uct.ac.za)

**Rosalind Adams** (Administrative Assistant in the Department of Psychology, University of Cape Town)

Email: [Rosalind.adams@uct.ac.za](mailto:Rosalind.adams@uct.ac.za)



Appendix E  
Approval of Ethics

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN



Department of Psychology

University of Cape Town Rondebosch 7701 South Africa  
Telephone (021) 650 3417  
Fax No. (021) 650 4104

07 June 2018

Zahraa Francis  
Department of Psychology  
University of Cape Town  
Rondebosch 7701

Dear Zahraa

I am pleased to inform you that ethical clearance has been given by an Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Humanities for your study, *Premarital first-time fatherhood among young Muslim men in Cape Town*. The reference number is PSY2018-036.

I wish you all the best for your study.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L Wild'.

Lauren Wild (PhD)  
Associate Professor  
Chair: Ethics Review Committee

University of Cape Town  
PSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENT  
Upper Campus  
Rondebosch