



The use of religion in coping with grief among bereaved Malay Muslim parents

Nur Atikah Mohamed Hussin, Joan Guàrdia-Olmos & Anna Liisa Aho

To cite this article: Nur Atikah Mohamed Hussin, Joan Guàrdia-Olmos & Anna Liisa Aho (2018) The use of religion in coping with grief among bereaved Malay Muslim parents, *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 21:4, 395-407, DOI: [10.1080/13674676.2018.1500531](https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2018.1500531)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2018.1500531>



Published online: 20 Aug 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 881



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 6 View citing articles [↗](#)



The use of religion in coping with grief among bereaved Malay Muslim parents

Nur Atikah Mohamed Hussin^a, Joan Guàrdia-Olmos^b and Anna Liisa Aho^c

^aDepartment of Social Work, School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia; ^bFaculty of Psychology, University of Barcelona, Institute for Research on the Brain, Cognition and Behaviour (IR3C), Barcelona, Spain; ^cSchool of Health Sciences, Nursing Science, University of Tampere, Tampere, Finland

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the influence of religion on bereaved parents after the death of a child. Literature had attempted to understand how religiosity may influence parental grief both in positive and negative ways. However, this area is scarcely explored in the Malaysian context. This qualitative study involved 11 bereaved parents who lost their children due to accidents ($n = 9$) and homicide ($n = 2$). Open-ended questions that focused on the importance, activities, and role of religion in the grieving process among Malay parents were asked. According to the thematic analysis, some of the main themes found were that the bereaved parents described religion as a beneficial mechanism in helping them to adapt with their losses through various responses that indicated the perception that religion as a guidance. However, other than the positive impact, religiosity can also lead the bereaved parents to experience negative effects of using religion as a coping strategy. The influence of culture is prevalent in the current study as the theme of mystical belief and paranormal experiences were also reported. This study provides some professional implication from the possible use of religion in intervention.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 20 April 2018
Accepted 11 July 2018

KEYWORDS

Religion; religiosity; Malay; parental grief; culture

The death of a child is the most intense and persistent type of bereavement when compared to other types of loss (Jaaniste, Coombs, Donnelly, Kelk, & Beston, 2017; Middleton, Raphael, Burnett, & Martinek, 1998). A child's death often triggers the feeling of lost hope and insecurity among many parents (Wing, Burge-Callaway, Clance, & Armistead, 2001). Bereaved parents' coping mechanisms may be effective or harmful depending on how bereaved parents make sense of their losses. One of these coping strategies is the use of religion and spiritual belief to deal with the death of a child (Ungureanu & Sandberg, 2010).

Religion has been argued to be a helpful mechanism in helping bereaved parents to make sense of their losses in positive way (Litman, 2006). Even though life for the bereaved will never be the same and a sense of sadness and longing for the lost child is there (Stroebe, Abakoumkin, & Stroebe, 2010), religious faith provides the belief that their lives are controlled by God and that negative life events are an opportunity for spiritual growth, and in return, they experience less stress (Becker et al., 2007; George, Larson, Koenig, & McCullough, 2000).

Religion has helped believers to find a source of stability and meaning in an uncertain world in its own way. A religious attendance and a belief in an afterlife have significant positive outcomes in terms of decreasing the level of depression after loss (Higgins, 2002). It has been found that religiosity also helps to shorten the period of recovery after a loss (Walsh, King, Jones, Tookman, & Blizard, 2002). Literature argues that religiosity helps the bereaved to find solace and, over time, allows them to find comfort, peace, and acceptance, which then enables them to move on with their lives (Halifax, 2008). However, the question of how religion helps bereaved parents and to what degree religion helps bereaved parents cope with their loss are still scarcely explored.

Despite the discussion of the positive roles of being religious in bereavement, there are also debates that claim religious faith may cause negative impacts on bereaved parents. Religious faith was found to create an understanding that the loss is a punishment for the bereaved parents, and this sentiment can cause negative responses during bereavement (Kara, 2017; Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998). Religious faith is also associated with anxiety (Cole, 2005; Van Dyke, Glenwick, Cecero, & Kim, 2009), depression (Bjorck & Thurman, 2007), hostility (Hebert, Zdaniuk, Schulz, & Scheier, 2009), and various manifestations of bereavement distress (Cowchok, Lasker, Toedter, Skumanich, & Koenig, 2010; Jacobsen, Zhang, Block, Maciejewski, & Prigerson, 2010). These arguments have shown that even though religion has been acknowledged to generate positive feelings in parental grief, in different contexts or situations, religion may also lead to negativity. For religious people, God is believed to be the most powerful entity, controlling the fate of human beings, hence negative events that happen in human lives may be interpreted as an act of cruelty from God.

Malay Muslims' background and bereavement

Religion plays a central role in the daily life of most of Malay people (Haque & Masuan, 2002). Compared to other Muslim populations in the world, Malay people are bond with their own belief, which they call *adat*. *Adat* is described as activities that have followed on from the previous generations and it plays an important role in Malay people's lives (Sahad, Abdullah, & Abdullah, 2013). *Adat* is sometimes argued to be inconsistent with Islamic teaching as Malay people are thus influenced by their indigenous beliefs, which are based on Hindu-Buddhist traditions. This is because before the arrival of Islam in the Malay world, most Malay people were Hindu-Buddhist believers (Sahad et al., 2013). For example, Malay people will conduct a feast which they called *kenduri tahlil* ("a prayer for the dead") at a certain period to seek forgiveness from God on behalf of the deceased (Ishak & Abdullah, 2012). The influence of the earliest religions and cultural beliefs (namely *adat*) makes the Malay Muslim population different from other Muslim populations in the world.

Even though it is known that much of the lives of the Malay people is influenced by religion, it is also important to know how bereaved Malay people react to the death of a loved ones as their faith may also be influenced by their culture. In Malay culture, there is a belief involving the existence of mystical spirituality that contain elements of myths, miracles, and magic (Sardar, 2000). Malay people believe in the existence of the spirit of the deceased, prophetic dreams, and fantasies (Wahab, 2013). Malay people believe that at certain times, the spirit of the deceased may come back to their houses

to visit his or her family members (Kasiman, 2017). However, these facts only focus on the reaction to bereavement among Malay people in general. There is limited information on the bereavement experience more specifically, especially in a certain population of Malay people, such as among bereaved parents.

The available studies on bereavement and religion are scarce, especially for a specific population with unique traits and a unique cultural background. In terms of the death of loved ones, a search on this issue in social media and reading material revealed limited information about how Malay people experience bereavement. Most sources discussed the technicalities of funerals, *tahlil* (the post-death ritual), and bereavement among widowers, for whom there are certain rules to follow, such as wearing unattractive clothes during the bereavement period (e.g., Ishak & Abdullah, 2012; Yakin & Mahali, 2008). Therefore, this study aims at understanding the use of religion as a coping mechanism among grieving Malay Muslim parents and it is hoped that the findings will contribute to the literature by illuminating how religion plays its role in parental grief, particularly in Malaysia.

Method

Recruitment

The recruitment process started once approval from the Internal Board of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, was obtained. To recruit the respondents, social media channels (namely Facebook, Twitter, and blogs) were used to identify potential respondents. Bahasa Malaysia was used as a medium in the postings. The sampling methods were as follows:

- (1) Using social media for identification: The researchers identified local stories about the death of a child through Facebook walls, Twitter, and blogs created by either the bereaved parents or the wider public. The researchers had personally contacted the writers who were the bereaved parents or among publics who know the bereaved parents.
- (2) Social media postings: The researcher proposed the idea of the research including the introduction of this study, the rationale of the study, and inviting bereaved parents or the wider public to either participate in the study or provide information on bereaved parents they know.
- (3) Snowballing: The bereaved parents who were interested in participating recommended friends or families who they knew to have experienced parental grief.

The bereaved parents or the wider public who responded to the mediums were contacted. The researchers then interviewed the potential participants to ensure that they fulfilled several criteria for participation, namely: (a) they must be Malaysian, (b) they must be of the Malay Muslim ethnic community, (c) they must have experienced the loss of a child due to traumatic death (i.e., an accident or homicide), (d) the loss had to have happened more than one year ago (both to protect vulnerable bereaved parents and to gain richer information since the bereaved parents had already been going through the bereavement journey for a certain period), and (e) the deceased child was aged from one to 18 at the time of her or his death.

Participants

Twenty-five potential participants were contacted; eleven parents agreed to participate. They comprised six bereaved fathers between the ages of 36 to 57 years old and five bereaved mothers ranging from 35 to 54 years old. The participants were all Malay Muslims. The children's causes of death were accident ($n = 9$) and homicide ($n = 2$). The death happened between two to eight years ago. The ages of the children at the time of death ranged from one to 16 years old.

Interview format

Semi-structured interviews were conducted. At first, general questions were asked to start the interview such as "how far you think that religion is important?" and "what are the rituals or religious activities that you do throughout your bereavement journey?". The investigation on the topics evolved based on the respondents' answers. These answers were probed further to enhance understanding on the respondents' experiences. The interviews were conducted by one of the researchers who is a native speaker of Bahasa Malaysia. The interviews were conducted in Malay. Audio recordings and field notes were used to ensure the dependability of this study. The interviews were conducted at the respondent's house ($n = 5$), at a mosque ($n = 5$), and at a canteen ($n = 1$). The interviews were conducted face to face, lasting between 50 min to an hour and 15 sec.

Data analysis

The interviews were recorded, translated from Malay to English, and transcribed in full. A professional translator was used to ensure the accuracy of the translation. Initially, systematic coding was done using ATLAS.ti (version 7). The coding process was done by the first author. The codes were gathered under each theme. The identical themes were gathered and categorised to answer each question and objective.

Some measures to achieve reliability of the data were conducted. First, the transcripts were reread several times and the codes and themes were refined. Second, peer debriefing among the researchers were conducted. Following completion of the analysis, the summary of the findings was submitted to the respondents to ensure the credibility and transparency.

The importance of religion in parental grief

All the bereaved parents agreed that religion had been crucial in coping with their grief. The bereaved parents responded firmly that religion had helped them to get through their grieving process. Different parents gave a different justification for why religion had been a pivotal element in their grieving process. The first reason pointed out was the role of religion in guiding the grieving response. A bereaved mother who lost her child in a motorcycle accident, M2, shared the inspiration she gained through her religious belief. She described her religious belief as her guidance. She remarked: "Definitely religion is everything. Otherwise, we are lost".

Similarly, a bereaved father, referred to here as F3, shared his feelings about losing his daughter due to a motorcycle accident. He portrayed his religious belief as providing guidance that enabled him to cope with his loss. He remarked: "Religion is everything to me. It helped me in many ways. I was devastated by the loss. Without religion, I do not think that I would be able to cope with my loss".

The bereaved parents also portrayed themselves as being closer to God after the loss. They believed that being closer to God meant that they were able to gain benefits, especially in seeking the psychological comfort to move on with their lives. For example, a bereaved father (hereafter F2) claimed:

After the loss, I became closer to God. It is compulsory. The loss has changed me into a better person in terms of my behaviour, my faith. We need to remember that eventually we will die too. This is a wakeup call for me.

In addition to believing that religion can serve as a foundation for staying strong after the death of a child, bereaved parents also found that informal advice based on religious teachings contributed to their ability to manage their grief. Bereaved parents described that religiously based motivational words were what they really needed and that such words had more impact compared to other kinds of motivational words. A bereaved father (hereafter F1) shared the following:

I really appreciate anyone who can give me motivational words based on religious belief. For example, one of my friends told me "Congratulations! Heaven is now yours". The friend said that the deceased child is waiting for me with a drink in heaven and that God will reward me with heaven.

Some of the bereaved parents also described that religiously based motivational words were found to be most helpful and suited them best. A bereaved father (hereafter F6) stated that his strong belief in religion has helped him to accept religiously based motivational words as one of the most important coping mechanisms he has used throughout his grieving process. F6 asserted:

Only religiously based motivational words helped me to feel better. Because I believe in God. I believe in my religion. Religiously based motivational words are consistent with my belief and it has helped me to make sense of the loss better when compared to other ways of support provided by people around me.

Religious activities involved in the grieving process of bereaved parents

The bereaved parents stated that certain types of religious activities were related to their grieving process. Several prominent activities were identified through their responses. According to the parents, sending supplications, praying, and religious attendance were vital activities in their grieving process.

Sending supplications

Sending prayers is a ritual in which the bereaved parents send good words and rewards to their deceased child. This is consistent with the Islamic religion, which encourages followers to send du'a (the act of supplication to God) for the deceased person. The du'a' usually

consists of hopes for the deceased child to be in heaven. It was also seen as an activity that extends the parent– child bonding, even after the death of the child. F3, who clearly remembered the moment he saw his daughter’s body after a motorcycle accident, remarked: “I always send my prayers to my deceased daughter. It is my new routine. Every time I start the car engine, before sleep, before anything I do. I hope that my prayers will go to her”.

Similarly, some of bereaved parents believed that sending prayers to their child might help the deceased child to gain a better place in the afterlife. A bereaved mother (hereafter M3) who lost her daughter due to motorcycle accident shared the following: “I never forget to send prayers to my deceased daughter. Every time, every minute, every second. I really hope that she gets my prayers. I want her to be in heaven. The highest level of heaven”.

Praying

Some of the bereaved parents reported that praying to God helped them to gain serenity. The bereaved parents portrayed this activity as an opportunity for them to confess to God. The confession enabled them to release their tensions after the tremendous loss. A surviving mother (hereafter M5), who saw her son’s body with severe trauma to the brain after an accident, shared the following: “I always pray to God to give me serenity when I remember him”.

Other bereaved parents also described praying continuously after the death of their child. A bereaved father (hereafter F4) who still remembered the death of his child due to homicide repeatedly noted his praying activities after the loss:

After the death of my child, I was lost. The only thing that I kept doing was sitting on the prayer mat. I prayed, prayed, and prayed. Only praying can make me feel better. I just want to forget everything else and focus on my relationship with God.

Religious attendance

Some of the bereaved parents did more than pray. For example, they participated more in charity activities and visited the Holy Land [Mecca], after the death of their child. They believed that these activities could help their deceased child in the afterlife. M3, who clearly remembered seeing her deceased daughter lying at the scene of the accident, shared the following:

I donate anything I can to the religious schools and poor people. I send a lot of prayers, which I hope can give something to my deceased daughter. I always remind myself that there is nothing else I can do except these things. Hopefully my prayers and efforts will benefit her. She will be happy in heaven.

Some of the bereaved parents reported that they went to the mosque and listened to religious lectures to gain comfort. They also claimed that mixing with the religious people helped them to feel comfort and serenity. The reason appeared to be that the religious people were the sources for gaining advice from the religious perspective. Since the bereaved parents believed in religion, advice from the religious perspective was meaningful and valuable to them. M2, shared the following:

When I feel sad, I go to the mosque. I pray, and I listen to a religious lecture. Then I feel relieved. I also enjoy being with the religious people as they always advise me to remember God and be

patient, and they tell me that my deceased child is now with God in heaven. I feel serene. This is what I need.

Meaning-making process

Meaning-making is one of the most important steps in regaining growth after the traumatic death of a child. Meaning-making is the ability to understand a loss and eventually accept it (Park, 2010). Among the participants, religion was heavily associated with making sense of the loss. Religion helped the bereaved parents to accept death as a part of life. M2 shared the difficulties she experienced after receiving the news of her son's death. She described experiencing nightmares and psychological distress after the loss. Religious belief helped her to accept the loss as fate. The feeling of hopelessness changed to undivided trust in God. M2 remarked:

It was hard. I kept having nightmares. I dreamt that he came back and died continuously. I was depressed and cried all the time. However, I read a lot of religious books. I attended religious lectures, then I understood that the death of a child meant it was time for him to die. It was already written by God and there is nothing we can do to change it. If God says that he will die at the age of 15, he will die, regardless of any reasons.

There were also bereaved parents who believed that the death of their child at a young age helped the deceased child to pass into heaven in the afterlife. F1 shared the following: "It is better for him [the deceased child] to be dead now. At least he has no sin. He definitely goes to heaven".

The bereaved parents were able to see the silver lining after the loss and associate the pain with rewards from God. They were able to find the wisdom behind the loss. F4, who lost his daughter in a homicide case, shared the following:

The death of a child is an opportunity for us to be rewarded and go to heaven. The child will be an angel who will serve us in heaven. In fact, after the death of our child, it is easier for us to attend religious activities and it makes us closer to God.

There were also bereaved parents who associated the loss with being punished by God. However, it is important to note that bereaved parents were also able to associate the punishment as a sign to improve their faith in God. M3, who lost her daughter in vehicle accident, shared the following:

Sometimes, I believe that this loss is a punishment from God. Maybe I was not a good believer. The loss is a sign for me to improve myself. I pray more, I got involved in religious activities. I feel it is like an alarm call for me ...

Eventually, the ability to make sense of the loss has helped the respondents to accept it. The bereaved parents were able to prevent any feelings of hopelessness and find acceptance as they believed that death was a part of their lives. Religion helped them to understand human limitations and the concept of fate. This was explained by M2:

We need to believe in fate. When we believe in fate, we feel acceptance. In Islam there is a concept of qadr (destiny). It means that if it is the time for him to die, he will die. If he does not die because of the accident, he will die in some other way. Nothing can be changed. It is just a test from God, which cannot be changed.

The bereaved parents associated religion with being serene after a loss. A feeling of serenity arose when the bereaved parents used religion as a tool to achieve acceptance,

gain a sense of peace and be able to accept their loss. A bereaved mother (hereafter M4), who lost her daughter in a rape and murder case, explained:

Religion helps us to gain serenity. When we pray, we are closer to God. When we are closer to God, we will feel serene. Eventually we will feel stronger and be able to move on with our life. We need to understand that the loss is a test from God.

Similarly, some bereaved parents believed that only religion could provide serenity to them. One of the arguments was religion helped them to be closer to God and being closer to God, in turn, provided them with comfort. F4 shared the following: “When we pray, we are closer to God. When we are closer to God, God will love us more. It helps me to feel safe and serene”.

Preventing deleterious psychological effects

Some of the bereaved parents described their religious faith as a shield against physical and psychological disruptions. The concrete faith in God allowed the bereaved parents to understand the mysterious ways of the higher power and the acceptance of fate. This eventually helped them to abate their negative emotions and minimised their experience of physical and psychological turmoil. F1 remarked:

As a Malay community with faith, for either females or males, the term “emotionally unstable” should not occur among Muslim people because we have religion. We have faith. If we are strong with our religion, there should not be any problem with going insane, psychological disorder, or severe depression because we will be rewarded for all such incidents that happen.

Similarly, some bereaved parents believed that having religious belief prevented them from going insane. M3 shared the following: “If there was no religion, I would go insane. The loss was so hard. I need something to hold onto”.

Religious faith was perceived to have helped the bereaved parents to bounce back stronger after their loss. Some of the bereaved parents applied the narration from Prophet Muhammad as their motivation to overcome their grief. The bereaved parents emulated the role models and their undivided faith in God helped them to be tough after a loss. A bereaved father (hereafter F5), another bereaved father who lost his son in an accident, said:

We are strong because we have our religious belief. God wants to give us more. We think in a nice way. We emulate the narration from the previous prophet. Even Prophet Muhammad lost his children. In addition, there was also a dialog from a bereaved mother who asked the Prophet Muhammad about her dead child. She asked what will happen to her. Prophet Muhammad then responded that the mother will be rewarded with heaven. Therefore, I became strong again.

Continuing bonding with the deceased

Religion was a tool that reconnected the deceased child with the bereaved parents. Religious activities such as prayers, donations, or performing the Hajj (an annual pilgrimage to Mecca) for the deceased child were described as a “bridge” that signified the remembrance of the deceased child. In addition, the bereaved parents believed that religion taught them that even after death, they were still able to give reward to their deceased child. M3, who lost her daughter after a motorcycle accident, related the following:

Religion is our faith. I gave everything on behalf of my deceased daughter. When she [the deceased daughter] died, the first thing that I remember we did was going doing *umrah* [a pilgrimage to Mecca] for her – we did it. That is the only way for me to give good things to her.

Nevertheless, there were also bereaved parents who associated religious belief with mystical thinking that their deceased child may return home to visit them. For instance, M2 stated that she tried to avoid being sad so her deceased daughter would see her in better condition during her “visit”:

Sometimes, I wonder, does my deceased daughter meet with her grandmother in the heaven? It makes me feel that she is so lucky. Religious people have told me that the deceased are looking at us. Therefore, I need to be strong. I am sure that my deceased daughter does not want to see me sad.

Experiencing the dark side of religiosity

In addition, the bereaved parents stated that religious faith was the reason why they avoided any kind of inquiry regarding the reasons for the loss. They said that inquiring about the loss would signify distrust in their religion. F6 shared the following: “Religion teaches us that any event either it is good or not, it is a faith. Do not ask why, why, and why? Just accept it. Otherwise, where is our faith?”

Similarly, F1 believed that discussing the loss was a sign of distrust of God and discussion about it with his spouse usually ended with a fight. This led to disharmony in the spousal relationship after the death of their child:

There is no need to discuss the loss. We both know that it has been written down by God. There is no doubt. Every time we talked about this [the loss], I said “There is no compromise”, but she [F1’s wife] kept forcing me to discuss the loss. We ended up not talking to each other for almost a year.

Although all the female respondents agreed that discussing about the loss in religious terms might signify distrust, they also claimed that they needed to express their grief about their bereavement because of their need to address the grieving emotionally. For example, M5 expressed the following:

It’s not that we do not understand the religious ways of accepting our fate, but this is still what I feel. There was one time when my husband came back from a badminton match, I told him to take a knife and just kill me because I could not handle it anymore.

Discussion

This study was concerned with the way religion is used as a tool for parents to cope with the death of their child. One of the most prominent findings was the unanimous agreement by the respondents that religion was a helpful tool for the parents to cope with the death of their child. All the respondents described religion in a positive way, such as when it provides guidance during grieving, which resulted in them feeling closer to God. One of the sources of religious guidance obtained by the respondents came from religious motivational words that were offered by the people in their surroundings. This is in line with the work of Litman (2006) who asserted that religion was a helpful mechanism by which parents found solace and comfort that alleviated the negative impact of

grieving. This consistency of the importance of religion between the accounts in the current study and what was reported by Litman signifies the universal value of religion, as is also argued by Wuthnow, Christiano, and Kuzlowski (1980).

This study also explored what religious activities were performed by the respondents in this study. One of the most reported activities performed was religious attendance at various religious institutions, varying from being as near as the local mosque or going as far as Mecca on a pilgrimage. Easterling, Sewell, Gamino, and Sterman (2000) provided a similar finding but in a different context when they found that attending churches alleviated the negative impact of grieving for the parents. This is in line with the work of Higgins (2002), who has found that religious attendance helped parents to reduce depression. Based on the findings of the current study and the findings of the literature, religious attendance may account for parents feeling better after religious attendance at the various institutions. This study acts as an update for religious attendance in a more recent time, but in a different religious institution (Islam).

Regarding the role religion plays during grieving, meaning-making is one of the most reported advantages obtained by the parents in this study when looking at their grieving through the religious lens. Park (2016) argued for the existential need for grieving people to find meaning behind the loss that they experienced. When parents lose their child, they have questions that reflect their existential dilemma regarding why the tragedy happened to them. Wortmann and Park (2009), in their meta-review, found that various studies concluded similarly: individuals who use religion as a coping mechanism to understand their tragedy during grieving adjust better than those who do not. A similar finding is replicated by this study where the parents benefited from using Islamic teaching to understand the concept of fate and destiny when addressing their loss. Another benefit perceived by the parents when it comes to using religion as a coping strategy was that their religiosity helped prevent them from getting deleterious disruptions. The disruptions reported were mostly psychological, such as “going insane” or experiencing emotional impact from the loss. Although these are just perceptions – since the parents only reported the effect as they experienced it – past studies have empirically shown that using religion to cope may be able to reduce psychological disruptions such as stress (George et al., 2000), self-blaming (Duncan & Cacciatore, 2015), and increase the feelings of solace and peace (Halifax, 2008). This invites further explanation for religiosity’s positive impact on psychosocial health throughout grieving.

Continuing the bonds that they had with their child was also a striking finding obtained in this study. Among the responses that indicated the continuing bonds that the parents had with their child were that they felt the presence of their child and that they performed religious rituals that would benefit their deceased child in the Hereafter according to their Islamic belief. In the studies of death and bereavement, Klass and Goss (1999) conceptualised the phenomenon called “continuing bonds” and noted how it was closely related to religion. This study offers the perspective among Malay people, whose religion is predominantly Islam, continuing bonds with the deceased is also a significant process that influences the way they grieve.

In relation to continuing bonds, this study also observed the influence of a mystical element through the responses of the parents. Some parents reported to experience the presence of their child who was looking at them, which made them to try to manage their grieving well by not being too emotional as they believed that that

behaviour will also made their deceased child to be unhappy. However, this is not the first study to document such a phenomenon. Kasiman (2017), Sardar (2000), and Wahab (2013) also highlighted some anecdotal experiences of individuals reporting mystical perceptions, such as feeling the presence of their deceased loved ones and having prophetic dreams about the deceased. This phenomenon is not unique to the Malay people, other studies (e.g., Berger, 1995; Laiho, Kaunonenm, & Aho, 2014) and anecdotal experiences (e.g., Walliss, 2001) have also documented that individuals in other cultures also experienced paranormal activities throughout their grieving process. However, the one trait related specifically to the Malay culture when it comes to mystical belief is that it is tied closely to the individuals' religious belief. The Koran has specifically indicated that the soul is the business of God alone (Koran 17:85); but the existence of the mystical belief (and the prevalent belief about souls) may be due to the cultural influence on the belief itself that leads many Malay people, including the parents in this study, to perceive that they experience the presence of the deceased.

This study also would like to highlight the responses of the parents that indicate a negative aspect of religiosity. This is consistent with the studies by Cowchok et al. (2010) and Jacobsen et al. (2010) who also reported some negative effects of religion on the grieving response. Some parents reported, that they had to just accept the destiny of their child's death. However, there are some parents who made a clear statement about how the practice of acceptance might be contradictory to their emotional needs. Even though previous literature had highlighted concerns about gender differences – in which men are more likely to use problem-solving and cognitive coping mechanisms when compared to women, who prefer to discuss their grieving feelings (Martin & Doka, 2000) – this current study suggested that in addition to gender differences, the belief in religion also dissuades bereaved parents from discussing their loss.

In addition, this negative aspect may have the possibility of preventing the parents from seeking professional help because it may contradict their belief in accepting their destiny. Therefore, this study would like to echo the concern by Haque (2005) that religious belief may prevent some Malay individuals from seeking professional help because they believe that questioning the loss is a sign of distrust in God and that their emotional distress can only be addressed through their religiosity. Hence, this study would like to highlight a professional implication from this finding and urge professional helpers to address the possibility that religiosity may hinder effective treatment. The way professional helpers can help is by highlighting that parents expressing their emotions about the loss is a natural human response and does not represent or indicate the level of their religiosity.

Conclusion

Religion is one of the powerful mechanisms that influence parental grief, especially among bereaved Malay parents. Overall, from the findings of this study it can be concluded that the ability of bereaved parents to grow after such a loss is influenced by their religious and cultural beliefs. As discussed in the literature, growth occurs after a loss due to the influence of religion, and the results of this study support this assertion. The findings suggest that researchers and practitioners should consider religion to be a component of effective grief counselling for bereaved parents. Even though there is also the concern that religion

can hinder bereaved parents from expressing their grief feelings, it is best to advise bereaved parents to express their feelings while still preserving their belief in God.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

- Becker, G., Xander, C., Blum, H., Lutterbach, J., Momm, F., Gysels, M., & Higginson, I. (2007). Do religious or spiritual beliefs influence bereavement? A systematic review. *Palliative Medicine*, 21(3), 207–217. doi:10.1177/0269216307077327
- Berger, A. S. (1995). Quoth the raven: Bereavement and the paranormal. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*, 31, 1–10. doi:10.2190/21LF-D90U-2RXN-1HF4
- Bjorck, J. P., & Thurman, J. W. (2007). Negative life events, patterns of positive and negative religious coping, and psychological functioning. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 46, 159–167. doi:10.1111/j.1468-5906.2007.00348.x
- Cole, B. S. (2005). Spiritually-focused psychotherapy for people diagnosed with cancer: A pilot outcome study. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 8, 217–226. doi:10.1080/13694670500138916
- Cowchok, F. S., Lasker, J. N., Toedter, L. J., Skumanich, S. A., & Koenig, H. G. (2010). Religious beliefs affect grieving after pregnancy loss. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 49, 485–497. doi:10.1007/s10943-009-9277-3
- Duncan, C., & Cacciatore, J. (2015). A systematic review of the peer-reviewed literature on self-blame, guilt, and shame. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*, 71(4), 312–342. doi:10.1177/0030222815572604
- Easterling, L. W., Sewell, L. S., Gamino, K. W., & Stermann, L. S. (2000). Spiritual experience, church attendance, and bereavement. *Journal of Pastoral Care*, 54, 263–275. doi:10.1177/002234090005400304
- George, L. K., Larson, D. B., Koenig, H. G., & McCullough, M. E. (2000). Spirituality and health: What we know, what we need to know. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 19, 102–116. doi:10.1521/jscp.2000.19.1.102
- Halifax, J. (2008). *Being with dying: Cultivating compassion and fearlessness in the presence of death*. Boston, MA: Shambhala.
- Haque, A. (2005). Mental health in Malaysia: An overview. In Z. A. Ansari, N. M. Noor, & A. Haque (Eds.), *Contemporary issues in Malaysian psychology* (pp. 26–46). Singapore: Thomson Learning.
- Haque, A., & Masuan, K. A. (2002). Perspective: Religious psychology in Malaysia. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 12, 277–289. doi:10.1207/S15327582IJPR1204_05
- Hebert, R., Zdaniuk, B., Schulz, R., & Scheier, M. (2009). Positive and negative religious coping and well-being in women with breast cancer. *Journal of Palliative Medicine*, 12, 537–545. doi:10.1089/jpm.2008.0250
- Higgins, M. P. (2002). Parental bereavement and religious factors. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*, 45(2), 187–207. doi:10.2190/RAUT-E0RX-TLE5-AU8Y
- Ishak, M. N. B. H., & Abdullah, O. C. (2012). Islam and the Malay world: An insight into the assimilation of Islamic values. *World Journal of Islamic History and Civilization*, 2(2), 58–65. Retrieved from [https://idosi.org/wjihc/wjihc2\(2\)12/1.pdf](https://idosi.org/wjihc/wjihc2(2)12/1.pdf)
- Jaaniste, T., Coombs, S., Donnelly, T. J., Kelk, N., & Beston, D. (2017). Risk and resilience factors related to parental bereavement following the death of a child with a life-limiting condition. *Children*, 4(96), 1–22. doi:10.3390/children4110096
- Jacobsen, J. C., Zhang, B., Block, S. D., Maciejewski, P. K., & Prigerson, H. G. (2010). Distinguishing symptoms of grief and depression in a cohort of advanced cancer patients. *Death Studies*, 34, 257–273. doi:10.1080/07481180903559303
- Kara, E. (2017). A qualitative research on university students' religious approaches during the grieving process. *Spiritual Psychology and Counselling*, 2(2), 203–223. doi:10.12738/spc.2017.2.0029

- Kasiman, N. A. (2017). *Roh pulang jenguk rumah* [Deceased spirit returns home]. Retrieved from http://www.kosmo.com.my/kosmo/content.asp?y=2012&dt=0805&pub=Kosmo&sec=Rencana_Utama&pg=ru_05.htm
- Klass, D., & Goss, R. (1999). Spiritual bonds to the dead in cross-cultural and historical perspective: Comparative religion and modern grief. *Death Studies*, 23, 547–567. doi:10.1080/074811899200885
- Laiho, S., Kaunonen, M., & Aho, A. L. (2014). Yliuonnolliset ilmiöt lapsen kuoleman jälkeen [Parents' experiences of paranormal phenomena and their effects after the death of a child]. *Thanatos*, 3, 45–60. Retrieved from https://thanatosjournal.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/laiho_yliuonnolliset.pdf
- Litman, J. A. (2006). The COPE Inventory: Dimensionality and relationships with approach- and avoidance-motives and positive and negative traits. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 41(2), 273–284. doi:10.1016/j.paid.2005.11.032
- Martin, T. L., & Doka, K. J. (2000). *Men don't cry ... women do: Transcending gender stereotypes of grief*. Philadelphia, PA: Brunner Mazel.
- Middleton, W., Raphael, B., Burnett, P., & Martinek, N. (1998). A longitudinal study comparing bereavement phenomena in recently bereaved spouses, adult children and parents. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 32(2), 235–241. doi:10.3109/00048679809062734
- Pargament, K. I., Smith, B. W., Koenig, H. G., & Perez, L. (1998). Patterns of positive and negative religious coping with major life stressors. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 37, 710–724. doi:10.2307/1388152
- Park, C. L. (2010). Making sense of the meaning literature: An integrative review of meaning making and its effects on adjustment to stressful life events. *Psychological Bulletin*, 136(2), 257–301. doi:10.1037/a0018301
- Park, C. L. (2016). Religion and meaning. In R. F. Paloutzian & C. L. Park (Eds.), *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality* (pp. 357–379). New York, NY: Guilford Publications.
- Sahad, M. N., Abdullah, A. H., & Abdullah, S. (2013). Syarak mengata adat memakai: Review of the Malay customs of Perlis from the perspective of 'urf. *Melayu*, 34–58. Retrieved from <http://jurnalmelayu.dbp.my/wordpress/?p=88>
- Sardar, Z. (2000). *The consumption of Kuala Lumpur*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Stroebe, W., Abakoumkin, G., & Stroebe, M. (2010). Beyond depression: Yearning for the loss of a loved one. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*, 61, 85–101. doi:10.2190/OM.61.2.a
- Ungureanu, I., & Sandberg, J. G. (2010). "Broken together": Spirituality and religion as coping strategies for couples dealing with the death of a child: A literature review with clinical implications. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 32(3), 302–319. doi:10.1007/s10591-010-9120-8
- Van Dyke, C. J., Glenwick, D. S., Cecero, J. J., & Kim, S. (2009). The relationship of religious coping and spirituality to adjustment and psychological distress in urban early adolescents. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 12, 369–383. doi:10.1080/13674670902737723
- Wahab, H. A. (2013). Petua dan pantang larang tradisional dalam alam Melayu Sarawak [Traditionally banned tips and tricks in the Sarawak Malay environment]. *International Journal of the Malay World and Civilisation (Iman)*, 1(1), 89–97. Retrieved from http://journalarticle.ukm.my/6397/1/IMAN1_8.pdf
- Walliss, J. (2001). Continuing bonds: Relationships between the living and the dead within contemporary spiritualism. *Mortality*, 6, 127–145. doi:10.1080/13576270120051811
- Walsh, K., King, M., Jones, L., Tookman, A., & Blizard, R. (2002). Spiritual beliefs may affect outcome of bereavement: Prospective study. *British Medical Journal*, 324, 1551–1554. doi:10.1136/bmj.324.7353.1551
- Wing, D. G., Burge-Callaway, C., Clance, P. R., & Armistead, L. (2001). Understanding gender differences in bereavement following the death of an infant: Implications for treatment. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 38(1), 60–73. doi:10.1037/0033-3204.38.1.60
- Wortmann, J. H., & Park, C. L. (2009). Religion/spirituality and change in meaning after bereavement: Qualitative evidence for the meaning making model. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 14, 17–34. doi:10.1080/15325020802173876
- Wuthnow, R., Christiano, K., & Kuzlowski, J. (1980). Religion and bereavement: A conceptual framework. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 19, 408–422. doi:10.2307/1386134
- Yakin, H. S. M., & Mahali, S. N. H. (2008). Duang: The semiotic interpretation and perception of the Bajau-Sama community in Sabah. *Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 24, 63–71. Retrieved from <http://ejournal.ukm.my/mjc/article/view/15121/4725>