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The Importance of Muslim Fathers in America

By Brady Silva

Introduction

Muslim immigrant families in America have recently come to the attention of various scholars, researchers, and healthcare professionals. In order to further understand immigrant families and help them effectively, scholars, researchers, and healthcare professionals seek to understand these families' structures and varying value systems that may differ among and between these families. These efforts provide insights on parenting styles in general, as well as the influence of parents, particularly fathers on children's involvement in religion, education, and many other areas. This emerging research about modern Muslim's families in the United States, including their family systems and parenting styles, is timely and very important, since it explores how members of these family units view their roles/intra-family importance.

There is a lack of insight in Muslim fatherhood and a father's importance to the family beyond protection, provision and the historical descriptions of fatherhood. This lack of information has reinforced some negative stereotypes surrounding Muslim fathers, such as the view that Muslim fathers exist outside the home and leave child caring to mothers. However, fathers are key components of Muslim families in America; they provide religious and spiritual instruction, encourage and provide for children's education, and protect the honor and values of their family. In this paper, I focus on heterosexual couples' parenting practices.

Views on Parenting

Human societies developed gender roles that fit their own social, cultural, and religious beliefs, including contemporary societies. Despite some differences, there is no debate that any parenting team brings different strengths, weaknesses, and parenting styles together (Bush 2016). Bush (2016) argues that a trend among all human families is that mothers and fathers tend to approach parenting with different priorities in mind. Priorities in the family are usually based around not only what the individual believes their chief responsibilities to the children are, but also based on social, cultural, and religious guidance from their societies (Bush 2016).

A typical generalization among different societies is to align “mothers” and “fathers” to the categories of “nurture” and “discipline.” While both have the potential to be strong disciplinarians in the family, it is often believed that the father will assume this role as well as emphasizing competition and strength in parenting (Bush 2016). In contrast, mothers are most often associated with nurture, prioritizing the comfort and care of their children. One of the male feminist Muslim scholars, Esack (2001), states that when listening to arguments about issues such as the *Jihad* (the struggle/fight against oneself and enemies of Islam) with Muslim women made him more uncomfortable than with Muslim men. The author explains that, despite the rise of feminism, a woman’s role as a mother has been focused on more than other areas; Muslim women are represented to be connected to each other and their children in terms of daily childcare and attending to the children’s various needs (Esack 2001, 127).

However, Pels (2000, 76) argues that research among multiple cultures about parenting tends to make broad based assumptions in terms of two differing perspectives. These two perspectives dominating parenting research are the “universalistic” perspective versus the “realistic” one; the former is based mainly on Western theorizing applied universally, while the latter one tends to look at parenting based on different circumstances. It is important to

understand these generalizations result in a lack of individuality among different families and different societies and has also contributed to many misconceptions surrounding Muslim family structure and Muslim fathers. Pels (2000) also explicitly acknowledges and critiques a one-sided perception of fathering.

Before discussing Muslim-American families and how they may operate structurally, and to understand what this means in terms of expected gender roles, it is important to examine how parenting is viewed in both Islamic and Western societies historically and contemporary. Barnett and Hyde (2001) aptly observes a huge change that has occurred in the 20th century specifically in the work environment and family roles of women and men in the United States. While tasked traditionally with the work at home and childcare, women in the US are now “disproportionately” represented at every level of higher education, and men are investing more time and energy in domestic affairs (Barnett and Hyde 2001, 781-782). Parenting and the gender roles in the United States have historically shifted from rigid to a more fluid decision and team approach (ibid., 782-783). This is not to say that parenting styles in America are not still influenced by the same cultural, social, and religious influences that also affect those of Muslim-American families as well as Muslim migrant families who move to Western European countries.

A monotheistic religion, civilization, and way of life, Islam is currently practiced by more than 1.2 billion people (Daneshpour 1998, 355). Without sufficient information about this particular population’s family structure as well as parenting techniques, an adequate healthcare, particularly therapy, cannot be delivered (Carolyn et al. 2000, 67-69). More importantly, a lack of understanding of Muslim families’ structure and gender roles leads to increasing misperceptions of family dynamics surrounding the importance and motivations of Muslim

fathers. In Carolan's (2000) study, many of such misperceptions are addressed by the first-hand interviews with some Muslim-Americans. In this study, several Muslim-American interviewees described their family dynamic as resonating with mutual respect rather than equality. While tasks may have been different, each partner respected and saw the value in the other's contributions. Both genders also voiced concerns for how Muslim women are objectified in American media for being so domestically involved, and how this is described as oppression. Both genders were also appalled by the amount of men in America that abandon their families (Carolan et al. 2000, 72).

The study also showed that Muslim-Americans, men and women alike, believe women and children are entitled to be provided and cared for by the father (Carolan et al. 2000, 72-73). This need for provisioning and care did not limit women to the work of nurturing and men to the work of providing. Most women in this study were employed in some capacity outside of the home and fathers participated in domestic chores and childcare to the same or even more degree than men in the US traditionally do (Carolan et. al 2000, 72-73). Pels's (2000, 76-79) research demonstrates that gender roles in Muslim families reflect their new social context and its ideological influence. However, the same research shows that migrants often tend to keep distance from cultural mainstreams in order to remain oriented to their country of origin (Pels 2000, 76-79). In many cases among Muslim immigrants, the father is often tasked with the responsibility of passing on vital religious and cultural information about Islam to the children in order to help them identify with not only their culture but also give them a strong base in the practice and understanding of Islam despite outside social influence (Daneshpour 1998, 356).

Muslim Fathers and Religion

Not all Muslim migrant families in America are the same and it is important to appreciate their differences. They come from many different Muslim countries and have many different backgrounds (Pels 2000, 76-81). Local, ethnic, and historical factors affect the way the Islamic faith can be interpreted and applied to family structure (Daneshpour 1998, 356). Despite these differences, Islamic ideology imparts a crucial link between the varying cultures and is fundamental for understanding the framework of family life (ibid.). Religious influences foster important ideas about family developmental tasks and can be observed reflected in children (Daneshpour 1998, 359). Many of these ideologies are predominantly patriarchal and are evidence of the expectations of fathers to impart religious education to the members of his family, especially children (ibid.).

In Carolan's (2000) study, one important trend exposed in results of the research was based on mate selection. While dating and mingling freely between Muslim men and women is not traditionally practiced, a huge part of mate selection is based on the seeking of specific qualities rather than appearance or status (Carolan et. al 2000, 72). While Muslim women often look for men who would be able to provide for the family, religiosity was considered to be the most important quality and was recognized by both genders; and, while females were expected to be educated in the religion, males were expected to be the ones responsible for educating their children on religious matters (Carolan et. al 2000, 72-73).

Rahman (2006) discusses one important father in Islamic tradition, Abraham, and gives insight into the kind of religious influences passed from a Muslim father's to children. The story of Abraham in the Qur'an, is an important examination of masculinity and paternity (Rahman 2006,72-84). Like many other religions, Islam can be viewed in the construct of a father-son nexus, but unlike other religions, the emphasis on the father-son relationship differs (Rahman

2006, 72-84). In other religions, this nexus lies in the submission of sons to their fathers. However, Abraham in Islam is introduced as a rebelling son, because he seeks to question his father's beliefs (Rahman 2006, 72-74). This leads to an understanding that the true submission for anyone is to his God and not the father (ibid.). Abraham's story does not use rebel as a negative term; to be rebellious does not mean to disrespect one's father as the authority in the household. Rather, a focus on rebellion introduces how crucial personal relationships with God are and the importance of children being involved directly in their religion (Rahman 2006, 72-74). Rahman (2006) points out that the Abraham's story focuses on the idea of him "getting his house in order." This phrase can be understood as a metaphor because by keeping his house in order it would mean Abraham is keeping a strong relationship with God. Thus by maintaining his household, he maintains this relationship with his God and can ultimately pass to his children these same ideals (Rahman 2006, 72-74). Hence, father's responsibility lies in helping their children understand and practice Islam on their own terms.

Safeguarding Family Honor

Pels (2000) also seeks to address some misinterpretations and misunderstanding of Muslim fathers and their roles. The author argues that historical gender roles were essential to the structure of Muslim families (Pels 2000, 77-78). Males were rarely questioned as authority figures. When the expectation of being an authority figure was not fulfilled, the family's honor was jeopardized and the father would be subjected to the community's criticism (Pels 2000, 77). The eldest male was expected to be the patriarch and bore the additional responsibility of being the representative of his family's moral values in the public sphere (Pels 2000, 78). It is important to recognize that in these societies' females and males often existed and still exist in

distinct and separate social spaces. Women's seclusion makes it essential for the father to be a representative for his family in social spaces, which women are not directly exposed to (ibid.). This cultivated the indirect involvement of fathers with their children that has become the subject of criticism of Muslim fatherhood. However, fathers have plenty of responsibility for contextual needs behind the scenes that directly affect children. Fathers are deemed responsible for their families' outward social behavior, upholding the honor of their wives and daughters, as well as preparing their sons to be respectable and respected men (Pels 2000, 78-79).

Daneshpour (1998) explores a relationship rarely addressed in research – the relationship between fathers and daughters. Several sources describe the relationship and importance of fathers influence on their sons (e.g., Rahman 2006). Daneshpour (1998) highlights the importance fathers have in upholding and safeguarding the wellbeing and interests of his daughters specifically. The author first debunks the idea that arranged marriages are the main way Muslim men and women end up together, and then argues that secular courts expect the father to be responsible for safeguarding his daughters' interests; for not doing so, the father could be punished legally (Daneshpour 1998, 357). The permission or advice of the father in regard to marriage is traditionally deemed important, because he is the main representative of the his daughter's interests. Additionally, if a father presents himself respectfully and responsibly, it is safe to assume that he has instilled these values in his own family. Hence, his comportment signals to the parties seeking the hand of his daughter the values she upholds (Daneshpour 1998, 357-358).

Esack (2001), like Daneshpour (1998), argues that Muslim men, particularly fathers hold the responsibility of representing their families' morals and honor. While women hold the power to jeopardize honor, men must take responsibility to restore the honor if it is lost based on a

women's actions (Esack 2001, 129). The idea of honor is not just linked to a masculinity and patriarchal control of Muslim women; both men and women care about their honor equally and both realize that it is an expectation of men of the family to be held accountable for the whole family's actions (ibid.). Respected and honorable fathers boost their families' status, including women, in their respected communities, while a Muslim women's respectability is intimately linked with how their fathers or husbands present themselves outside of the home (Esack 2001, 129). While the non-Muslims often misinterpret these familial arrangements and ideals as fathers' possession of total dominance over their families and unabridged control of their children with no intervention and inclusion of the mother in decision-making, it is important to remember that migration and immigration from majority Islamic societies to Western ones have resulted in significant changes for Muslim families. Although Muslim fathers are trying to hold on to some of their traditional positions, the family dynamics have changed overtime (Pels 2000, 77-79).

Pels (2000) and Conway-Long (2006) try to assess and explain the changing nature of Moroccan Muslim families. Conway-Long (2006) interviewed 48 men in three local cities about the kind of power men and women have in the families. The interviewees' answers to these questions, while differing slightly, provide a glimpse of how men view themselves at the family level. These men saw their power in a traditional sense as providers, centered in their work and ability to financially support the family (Conway-Long 2006, 145-146). Yet, fathers' intellect, personal control over decision-making, political power and leadership were also equally important (ibid.). These men took pride in representing their families in public, acting as a liaison between their families and the rest of the community. However, recent socio-political and economic changes in Morocco made some men feel threatened in their positions (Conway-Long

2006, 146-147). Women who are usually tasked with housework, and taking care of their husband and children, are now seeking more education, work opportunities, and are engaged in public life more than before (Conway-Long 2006, 146).

Muslim fathers in Islamic societies like Morocco may see women's increasing autonomy as threatening, unlike Muslim fathers in Western societies, such as the Netherlands and the United States. Muslim families from Morocco in the Netherlands have seen the increasing changes in family structures adopting influences from the traditional western family ideals that exist in their new homes (Pels 2000, 81-82). Many Muslim fathers in the Netherlands have accepted the changing nature of women's social roles and their new participation in roles outside of traditional responsibilities like home and childcare. These changes affected men's lives as well. Muslim fathers in such countries as the Netherlands are more actively engaged in their children's lives (ibid.). Indeed, fathers' responsibility to uphold their families' moral values and instill those values in their children is arguably even more important in migrant families in these western societies because for all family members there are now additional outside influences to navigate (ibid.).

Fathers for Education

Carolan's (2000) study provides important insight in how Muslim American fathers encourage their children and wives' education. Yet, women's seeking education and men's reaction to this vary among Muslim families in various areas. While Conway-Long (2006) points out that in several Islamic societies some men see these changes as possibly threatening and demeaning to their positions as males, Muslim fathers and husbands in the United States have formulated a different way of looking at this change. For example, one married Muslim man

whose wife had decided to attend school to become a medical assistant explained that he supported his wife's education but when she was employed, he did not expect her to provide for the family (Carolan et. al 2000, 74). He saw himself in a similar light as some Muslim men do as the financial provider for family, which made it easy for him to be supportive of his wife's decision to seek schooling while still upholding his position as provider. Hence, Muslim-American women's seeking schooling and work does not seem to threaten Muslim-Americans men's positions of provider for the family, but allows women to branch out and grow intellectually (Carolan et. al 2000, 74).

Immersing in a Western society and bridging cultural divides, it become important for all members of the family, including older generations or those from the rural areas, to seek opportunities for education (Pels 2000, 81-83). Muslim immigrant fathers are encouraged to provide for and assist in their children' schooling as a means of ensuring better futures for them. It should be noted, however, Muslim fathers encouragement of their children's education is not unique to the Western context. While some Muslim fathers in the Netherlands experienced a decline in their employment due to the lack of formal education, they still uphold other traditional responsibilities (Pels 2000, 81-82). They continue to educate their young children on appropriate behavior outside of house, because their behavior a reflection on the family as a whole (ibid.). Once children reach school age, their fathers' roles becomes more active, especially in the case of relationships with adolescent sons (Pels 2000, 85). Fathers maintain all official contacts with outside institutions, schools in particular; they control and guide their children through all educational matters (ibid.).

Muslim fathers prove important to children's education based on the Normative Islamic Principles (or *Shariah*). While in the majority of *Shariah's* interpretations, an Islamic law grants

custody and care of young children to mothers, once a child reaches school age, the custody shifts to the father (Daneshpour 1998, 359). This is most likely due to the fact that the law on custody of children is based mainly on which parent can best support the child/children financially (ibid.). It could be that since the father is tasked with providing for wives and children, the added ability of the father to provide educational avenues for his children usually sway the decision in his favor (ibid.). Similar themes were highlighted in Carolan's (2000) study. In the Muslim majority countries, women usually depend on extended families to help providing childcare and expected their extended families emotional and financial support (Carolan et. al 2000, 74-75). However, for Muslim American mothers this can prove difficult because their separation from extended family. This has led to a newfound dependence on their spouses in the realm of childcare. Similarly, Pels (2000) study demonstrates how Muslim mothers in the Netherlands seek more emotional and in-home support from their husbands. In this context, Muslim fathers are stepping up the plate to help their wives with childcare, especially as children start their schooling.

Conclusion: Seeing Muslim Fathers

Even though biologically women are often seen as more connected to children because they are responsible for childbirth, children are just as important to their fathers as they are to their children. Muslim men's importance as fathers in part rests on their roles as providers and their public lives outside the family. Muslim fathers in the United States have to constantly balance their native culture and religion and American cultural influences on their families lives. The lack of research on Muslim families and fatherhood results in general public and pundits relying heavily on Islamic ideologies and historical information that do not take into account

individual uniqueness of each person and variegated socio-cultural contexts within which Muslim families reside. It is important to learn more about Muslim families, motherhood and fatherhood to not only help the healthcare industry cater to these families but also to help combat negative stereotypes plaguing our knowledge about and understanding of Muslims worldwide. The lack of research on the subject is made apparent even in this paper. It was incredibly hard to come by any updated statistics or studies surrounding Muslim Americans, Muslim fathers, and even fatherhood in general. There is a need for more research, because such information could benefit social work, healthcare, and the overall cultural tolerance and understanding in the United States. Fathers are important figures in any family serving as templates for their sons, protectors of the daughters, and partners to their wives. Families among all cultures vary individually despite cultural, social, and religious influences, especially Muslim families because their beliefs vary so widely. More research on Muslim families in general and especially fathers is essential to understanding a huge part of the American population as well as moving in a direction that combats negative stereotypes about Muslim fathers.

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