Fathers and Loss

Faculty of Wellbeing Education and Language Studies (WELS)

Call for doctoral projects starting in October 2027

The Open University

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Project description

Project Type

This is a PhD project

Please note that a research proposal aligned with this research project will be required from applicants in addition to an application form.

School

Health, Wellbeing and Social Care

Unit

Institute of Educational Technology

Members

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Aim

This project aims to explore the experiences of fathers who have experienced perinatal loss, that is, a miscarriage, stillbirth, or neonatal death of their child and to identify their coping responses and support needs.

1. Elicit insight into father's lived experience following perinatal loss including disenfranchising grief.
2. Explore the myriad ways in which fathers respond to and cope with their grief including avoidant behaviours and engagement in physical activity.
3. Identify bereavement support needs of those affected including those with limited representation including South Asian fathers.

Methodology

A qualitative study guided by Heideggerian (hermeneutic) phenomenology is proposed since it is concerned with understanding and interpreting experience (Heidegger, 1962). Moreover, given the personal and variable experience of perinatal loss, our methodological framework was pivotal to understanding the nature of fathers' experiences and the meaning they ascribe to them. From this perspective our project has provided a unique and original contribution to the phenomena being researched. Interview data will be analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006) following the six steps for thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) data familiarisation through transcribing, reading and re-reading the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) generating themes by

collating related codes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) writing up the final results.

Contribution

The project will address a lack of accounts of loss and research pertaining to fathers' experience of perinatal loss and contribute to the re-framing of lived experience and responses to loss which have been typically viewed through a socio-cultural lens. That is that men are stoic, protective, caregivers who do not want to or need to express and or share their grief.

Of the few studies (Obst et al, 2020; Williams et al, 2020) that have explored the impact of perinatal loss on fathers, the findings reveal that fathers are also more likely to engage in avoidant coping behaviours such as increased substance abuse and are less likely to access support services. Fathers affected by perinatal loss want and need improved support following the death of a baby, but the question remains: in what way and how? Clearly, supportive care must be improved, but we lack crucial research about what support fathers need and where practice priorities should be directed to improve support and care.

The proposed project directly addresses this knowledge translation gap. It draws on pilot research undertaken to date and led by Project lead Jones, Robb & Murphy (2024) in the UK. This project will bring the lived experiences of fathers, especially groups with limited representation, such as people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds together to inform and transform supportive care. Ultimately, this project represents an essential first step towards improved support for the 500 fathers impacted by the loss in the UK each year.