



SOCIOCULTURAL PERCEPTIONS OF INFERTILITY: INSIGHTS FROM A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF INFERTILE INDIVIDUALS

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*Peer-review under responsibility of 3rd Asia International Multidisciplinary Conference 2019 editorial board
(<http://www.utm.my/asia/our-team/>)*

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Research Highlights

This article is premised on the notion that infertility is a subjective construct that individuals employ to make meaning of their experiences (Greil & McQuillan, 2010). The study explored the sociocultural meaning and perceived causes of infertility among married women and men experiencing primary infertility in Kwara South, Nigeria. Results from the study showed that the bases of understanding infertility are engrained in culture. Infertility is broadly defined in the range of lack of conception and inability to achieve a live birth which is described as barrenness and childlessness respectively. It is also defined as a major life problem: defeat of the purpose of creation and/or marriage. Cultural and spiritual factors were exalted as primary causes of infertility. These include lifestyle choices or habits (waywardness/promiscuity, alcoholism, substance abuse and diet); beliefs on rape, dirtiness, abortion, wrong mate selection, and spiritual oppression, trial and punishment from God.

Research Objectives

Infertility is conceived differently in Western and non-Western societies. While the biomedical definition of infertility has a wide acceptance in developed nations where infertility is acknowledged and managed openly (Greil, McQuillan, & Slauson-Blevins, 2011), infertility in most non-Western cultures is rather denied and perceived as unmentionable, a burden to be borne and managed secretly (Van Balen & Bos, 2009). Most studies on infertility in developing nations have focused on establishing the prevalence and medical causes of infertility with a view to improving service delivery on treatments and assessment for psychological counseling. While, a few have examined public perceptions on the meaning of infertility, empirical examples are scarce of how infertile persons perceive and/or define their situation and the implication this could have on the management of infertility. This study therefore explored how infertile persons define and describe the causes of infertility. Understanding these will go a long way in managing infertility if these are incorporated into health campaigns and sensitization programs targeted at improving reproductive healthcare services in Nigeria. This study will without any doubt add to the social discourse on infertility and improve awareness of infertility as a reproductive social problem in Nigeria.

Methodology

This study was designed as a qualitative exploratory research, using qualitative in-depth interview data 13 women and 7 men experiencing primary infertility at least two years prior from Kwara South Nigeria were interviewed. The study was approved by University of Ilorin Teaching Hospital Ethical Review Committee. Interviews were semi-structured using an open-ended interview question guide. Prior to interviews, participants signed informed consent statements. All interviews were conducted by the first and third author at different occasions and digitally recorded with the approval of participants. Interviews were done in at places chosen by research participants and in their preferred languages. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling with assistance of 2 gatekeepers. Conventional content analysis was done with the aid of Atlas.ti (version 7). Data were transcribed by the first and last author. Data were coded and analyzed by the first, third and fourth author under the supervision of the second author. Transcripts were condensed and codes were generated inductively from the data. These were later grouped into categories from which themes were





developed. This qualitative content analysis was done based on the evaluative criteria suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Results

Infertility from this study is culturally defined along gender, expected timeframe for conception after marriage and existentially. Similar to the findings of Koster-Oyekan (1999), infertility is defined as inability of a woman to become pregnant (barrenness) and/or inability to have a live-birth (childlessness) usually within a year of marriage. These categories also have varying consequences. For a man, it is basically his inability to make a woman pregnant. These are comparable to findings of Okonofua, Harris, Odebiyi, Kane, and Snow (1997) and Pearce (1999). Infertility is also existentially defined as “death of a man”, “defeat of the main purpose of being human” and “defeat of the purpose of marriage”. While some of the participants define it as “worse than any disease especially if it has no cure”, it is perceived by others as a “social disease”.

Causes of infertility based on the study can be grouped into two categories: social and supernatural. The social category describes infertility resulting from one’s social actions and inactions. These include dirtiness, waywardness/sexual promiscuity, abortions, rape, sexually transmitted infections, drug abuse and modernization to mention a few. Supernaturally, infertility is believed to be permitted by God as “trial”, “punishment for sin” or “spiritual oppression”.

Findings

The findings of this study showed that infertility is a social problem. Infertility usually is self-diagnosed few months after marriage if there is delay in conception. Assistance is then sought from perceived relevant authorities (spiritualists, medical professionals or a combination of both) to ascertain the cause of infertility. Reasons for infertility are defined as social and spiritual while the supposed medical explanations are inextricably linked with culture.

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