The Couple Congruence of Communication among Chinese Infertile Couples with IVF: A Qualitative Study

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Physiology and Prevalence of Infertility

- Infertility (clinical): the inability of a sexually active, non-contracepting couple to achieve pregnancy in one year (Mascarenhas et al., 2010)
- Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART)
  - e.g. in vitro fertilization (IVF)
- Prevalence of Infertility
  - China: 15.5% (1-year infertility, 2011) (Zhou et al., 2018)
  - Globally: 9% of women (Boivin, Bunting, Collins, & Nygren, 2007)
- Factors of Infertility: Not a FEMALE Problem
  - Female
  - Male
  - Mixed
  - Unexplained
Couple Congruence on Communication in the Context of Infertility

Conversational Intimacy in Mainland China (Jankowiak and Li, 2016)

● “dutiful spouse” model: people born between the 1960s and 1977
  ○ Chinese women: emotional labor
  ○ Chinese men: drop out of childbearing

● “emotionally involved” model: younger people born after 1978 (at reproductive age)
  ○ conversational intimacy: perceived as a fundamental attribute in the evaluation of marital relationship
  ○ male involvement and reciprocal process
  ○ women: requires attention and verbal presence as the successful management of marriage
Couple Congruence on Communication in the Context of Infertility

Couple Communication in the Context of Infertility

- Communication and marital relationship
  - decreased depressive symptoms and infertility-related stress among infertile couples (Peterson et al. 2006).
  - negative responses involving mutual avoidance or withdrawal are associated with relationship distress and dissolution (Falconier & Epstein, 2011)
- Positive communication patterns is hard to be established for infertile couples:
  - the complicated and fluctuated emotional process
  - weakened masculinity: disclosing emotional feeling (Throsby and Gill, 2004)
Methods

- Participants
  - Ten participants (five pairs of couples)
  - Self or partner diagnosed with clinical infertility and had conducted IVF treatment

- Recruitment
  - Location: Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Queen Mary Hospital, Hong Kong
  - Potential participants is approached and referred by practitioners.

- Methods
  - Focus group: male (husband) group and female (wife) group
  - Semi-structured interview

- Data Analysis
  - Driven by grounded theory, data were analyzed by thematic analysis using NVivo 12.
Research Objectives & Interview Transcript

● Research Aim

to understand the communication dynamics among Chinese infertile couples undergoing IVF.

● Interview Transcript

○ Please describe your IVF treatment journey briefly.
○ How you feel during the different process of IVF? Please use the face stickers to facilitate your description.
○ How did you and your partner cope with the changes due to infertility and IVF?
○ During the infertility journey, did you have smooth communication with your partner? Do you think your communication influence you and her well-being and marital relation during the treatment?
Theme 1: couple incongruence on communication

Chinese infertile couples share different perception of partners’ experience in importance of childbearing, psychosocial distress of self and partner, and satisfaction on communication etc. For example, husbands are more likely to overestimate wives’ yearning for child and usually revel in the quality of communication which their partners don’t agree with. This sense of disagreement between a couple in relation to their definition of quality of communication leads to the relational distress among infertile couple.

Case 1

Husband: “both of us actively communicate....I don’t think my factor [oligozoospermia and asthenospermia] influence a lot...”

Wife: “When I ask him to take supplements, he is always mad at me and refuse to do that.”
Theme 2: men as a situated silencer

The medical procedure of IVF and masculine norms of Eastern lead men to be a situated silencer. Husbands play as an emotionally detached supporter, and hardly express their feelings along the IVF journey.

Case 2

Husband: “I don’t know what I can do and say...somehow I feel numb...but I think she understand me [though I keep silent]”

Wife: “IVF is quite tiring and suffering, [but] my husband is not that helpful actually...I always told him that he didn’t care about me.”
Limitations

- a pilot study: limited number of participants
- clinical sample: may ignores the communicative experience and needs of those who did not seek for medical treatment but still identified themselves as infertility.
- the self-selection bias
Implications

● Chinese infertile couples demand communicational intimacy during infertility treatment. This study sheds light on the changing role about conversational intimacy and interdependence under the context of transforming patriarchy in modern China.

● The findings demonstrate the need for counseling and programmes targeting infertile couples to promote couples’ communication in a responsive way as well as consider interpersonal understanding.


Please feel free to give FEEDBACK :) 
Thank you!

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