

The Concept of Stigma and its Relevance to Women's Experience of Infertility

Nonye Lucy Okonji

Environmental Health Science Department, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka

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ABSTRACT

Motherhood is considered as a legitimate adult female identity. In most of the societies, the only and main purpose of marriage is procreation however other considerations as for providing companionship is seen as not being accepted within the society. Hence infertility is seen as a source of stigmatization among women who are unable to achieve fertilisation. Irrespective of the man who may be responsible for the cause of the infertility, women often bear the consequences. Such consequences as stigmatization of the adult female is more obvious because of childlessness. Research studies indicate that adult female who experienced infertility have expressed being stigmatized. This paper examined some studies carried out on the concept of stigma and utilizes a conceptual framework to highlight the experience of being stigmatized by the adult reproductive female.

Key Words; Stigmatisation, Reproductive adult Female, Concept

INTRODUCTION

According to Link, B.G (2006), In African traditional society the main purpose of marriage is to produce children that are to inherit their parents activities and continue with the lineage of the family. Thus the presence of children in the family guarantee this. Research studies cited the stigmatization experienced by those who have infertility. Research studies highlighting the social and cultural influences in relation to stigma are also discussed. This paper is written to cite the social and cultural influence associated with stigma and proffer measures which can help in this situation.

Conceptual Frame work on stigmatization

According to Goffman (2001) The term stigma originated from a Greek word referring to a bodily signs designed to expose the moral or social circumstances which negatively affects the individual. for instance the presence of **amputated** ear or cut could mean either the person is a slave or some other negative attribute describing the moral status of the individual Goffman in his extensive work on stigma pointed to ascertain the sociological influence of stigma on an individual hence he viewed stigma on an individual who is disqualified for any acceptable societal involvement. Such individuals labeled by the society is reduced to a person with a negative phenomena this can be described as stigmatisation. Upon this concept. Stigma is described as a situation which significantly discredits an individual. However many researchers have defined stigma from various perspectives. Thus the word stigma have cut across various disciplines like sociology psychology among others. According to Linkled (2008) he successfully summarised stigma if most of these negative characteristics are noted on the individual. If the society distinguish and label the human differences in the person, the dominant labeling characteristics and the cultural beliefs linking the person to an undesirable feature, that the labeled person is linked to abnormal societal norm leading to distancing of the individual and separation, and where the person experiences status discrimination that lead to an unequal outcome. Stigmatisation therefore is entirely dependent on access to social, economic, cultural and political power.

Exploring the nature of stigma in female infertility using the conceptual framework of Link and Phelan. The conceptual framework of Link & Phelan based on research and infertility is thus necessary to be adopted. Link cited that there are human circumstances and differences which can lead to distancing and labeling.

Human differences and labeling in relation to infertility

The term stigma refers to an attribute which can lead to distancing and deeply discredits an individual. Infertility is among the topics that can lead to stigmatisation and labeling. In a study carried out by (Mallil 2007) to explore the constructs of infertility carried out in a community, a systematic random sampling of 150 respondents comprising 79 females and 71 males, was drawn from a city register in a Canadian province. The result indicated that to desire motherhood is strongly related to women indicating 86 % percent of the population. The study therefore cited that infertility or childlessness can lead to social distancing or discrimination which is stigma. Further studies by Letherby (1999) in UK lends support to this study by indicating that women prefer their own biological motherhood than any other. But according to another survey in British community, there are couples who feel less because of childlessness because they have voluntarily accepted this and however felt satisfied because of adoption or accepting their circumstances. The sample to this study is however small. According to study carried out in Kenya by Kimani, v. Olenja (2008) about the cultural dimension of infertility and how it impacts on the lives of infertile women, data were collected from seventy infertile women through focus group discussions on fertile and infertile women from some selected communities. The study result showed majority of women in this community view childless women as being very unfortunate. They widely acknowledged child bearing as an important aspect to bonding in families. They went further to cite that during prayers, thanksgiving was given to God, for them to have come out from the shame of being childless. Another study carried out in the United States of America by Miall (2009), which was drawn from 71 childless women in the community who freely volunteered to participate in the study. These women were asked to provide details of social distancing meted out on them, The women were between the ages of 24- 45 years, well educated, some were among the middle class citizens, They are whites and twelve of them were previously married but separated. They were married to infertile men. The study revealed that the infertility problem was viewed mainly as a woman's problem. A study carried out by the Nayar in India however reported that infertility is considered men and women problem. In another study by Remennick (2008) in Israel with 26 women from communities who were recruited for the study of infertility, twenty of them were married, six were separated. The findings indicated that children were considered highly in their social and economic activities. These infertile women are deprived socially and considered a mal fit in the society. Apart from societal deprivation, the women had the biological instinct of having children even if they have achieved economic balance. The problem of not having children renders wealth, other status useless if there is no child.

Cultural Beliefs Linking Infertility to Undesirable Characteristics

According to Kimani, v. Olenja (2007), respondents to a study carried out in India among infertile women who voluntarily participated cited that various derogatory terms were used to describe their inability to bear children, for instance a woman described how her mother in-law would call her a male specie because of childlessness. In another setting in India where they were described as a specie of animal who cannot breed. The authors concluded that infertility could have a serious effect on both the psychological well being and the social status of an infertile woman based on culture. Their culture demands that the essence of marriage is for the marriage to produce offspring in continuation of their lineage.

Social Distancing and Separation in Relation to Infertility

Studies in areas like India, Israel, Mozambique, Nigeria have highlighted that even the infertile women themselves avoid social gatherings, discussions, so as to avoid being confronted with certain questions not desirable to them. According to studies by Remennick (2008) who cited that in Israel question such as what are you waiting for to give your in-laws children or when will you give grandchildren to your family is asked. In Nigeria, social distancing is not as pronounced but the infertile woman decides the type of social activities she may likely avoid or attend. This scenario in Nigeria is quite different from the study carried out

in Mozambique where infertile women are prevented from even attending activities like child naming ceremonies, attending to delivery of a new born child with the believe that the child is likely to die when an infertile woman handles the child, however the study in Nigeria and Israel have not seriously pronounced such visible social distancing but the infertile women are the ones likely to initiate the social distancing.

Experience of status loss and discrimination as a result of infertility.

Labelling , social distancing among others are the undesirable characteristics experienced by infertile women but in some communities , infertility have not diminished their social, economic status .According to Sewpaul (2009) the study conducted in South Africa concluded that despite societal pressure, sense of being discriminated and low esteem in the community , the Indian, white coloured in the study who are infertile did not experience the societal discrimination or social distancing from their communities.

CONCLUSION

Various studies and literature cited the influence of childlessness on infertile women. Studies carried out in different communities highlighted the degree of pressure and stigmatization experienced by the infertile woman. Some of the societies were so open in their criticism while some were not outright in their labeling. This study is therefore carried out to health educate the infertile women in the community where they are visibly separated from social activities. Health education can offer relief to these women who can be depressed because of the social distancing and labeling further, health education can offer relief to the infertile woman who can be vulnerable to developing medical conditions as depression, raised blood pressure among others. These infertile women are also encouraged to join social groups to discuss their common problems and proffer solution.

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