

Abstract

Title Male Infertility in Contemporary Japan: Narratives of Infertile Men and their Wives

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1. Introduction and Purpose

According to the World Health Organization, in 1997, male factor infertility affects no fewer than half of all infertile couples. Nonetheless, in Japan, male infertility has been shrouded in secrecy for decades. Traditionally, it was assumed that the female was at fault for any problems regarding reproduction; however, male factor infertility has recently become the focus of both medical and political inquiries regarding Japan's declining birthrate.

Previous studies have reported that infertile men tend to remain silent about their status due to the stigma associated with male infertility. Male infertility is popularly, although usually mistakenly, conflated with impotence, as both disrupt a man's ability to impregnate a woman and to establish virility, paternity, and manhood.

However, as there is scant sociological research on male infertility in Japan, little is known about the role of infertility in men's lives. This paper explores male infertility in contemporary Japan by analyzing the narratives of infertile men and their wives. The major objectives of this paper were as follows: (1) To clarify the experience of male infertility by analyzing the narratives of men who have consulted a urologist for treatment; (2) To investigate the physical experiences associated with male infertility by analyzing the narratives of Japanese couples whose male member has been diagnosed with azoospermia by a urologist; (3) To examine how women relate to their infertile male partners by analyzing the narratives of wives with husbands with male factor infertility; and (4) To investigate how men with male factor infertility disclose this condition to others, especially to their family/friends.

The data were collected during semi-structured interviews with a total of 19 subjects, eight males and 11 females, between 2016 and 2018. I also analyzed data collected during interviews with five urologists in 2016.

2. Results

The results for each of the four major objectives of this paper were as follows:

- (1) Most male subjects sought infertility treatment at the request of their wives. As the men were aware of the issues associated with the diagnosis and knew that seeking treatment for male infertility remains somewhat taboo in Japan, they believed that male infertility should be publicly recognized as a disease.
- (2) First, although the urologists performed the surgery for azoospermia on the male's testes, they regarded the couple as the patient. Second, the psychosocial impact of azoospermia affected both members of the couples. Additionally, all patients requested that the urologists perform more

invasive reproductive treatments, even though these were unlikely to extract sperm.

- (3) Most female subjects coped with the infertility of their husbands by providing both physical and psychological support. As most were aware of the stigmatization of male infertility, they also felt sympathy for their husbands.
- (4) Most male subjects disclosed their infertility to their wives and parents when they were diagnosed. However, they also “managed” the information provided to their parents. Half the male subjects disclosed their infertility to their superior/colleagues at work and to friends but, in general, the latter did not respond to the disclosure. On the other hand, some female subjects did not disclose their partner’s infertility to their parents or friends because they wanted to protect their partner’s masculine image from the threat of stigmatization. It appears that both the aforementioned information management and this “preemptive non-disclosure” on behalf of their husbands reflect and perpetuate a gender-biased understanding of “infertility as a women’s issue”.

3. Conclusion

Two conclusions can be drawn from the foregoing empirical results: First, male infertility is regarded as the wife’s problem in contemporary Japan. In other words, men do not consider their own infertility to represent a physical disorder on their part; instead, they regard it as a marital problem that complicates the establishment of a family. Second, male infertility should not be stigmatized or viewed as too intimate for open discussion. Instead, it should be included in the contemporary trend toward medicalization and viewed as a “disease”.

This paper used in-depth interviews to explore the infertility experiences of men diagnosed with male factor infertility. In Japan, this is considered to be pioneering research, and the results should be used to develop effective practices/policies to support Japanese infertile people.