

Infertility in Malawi and constructions of relationships







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Overview

-  Infertility and relationships in resource-poor settings
-  Methodology of study of infertility in Malawi
-  Analysis of Malawian women's descriptions of marital affairs
-  Implications

Infertility is a neglected, but serious problem

- Prevalence of secondary infertility in resource-poor settings is high (17% in Malawi, Larsen, 2000)
- Social, normative expectations that one ought to bear (many) children
- Psychological and social consequences (stigmatization, exclusion/ verbal/physical abuse) (Dyer et al, 2002; Papreen, 2000; Riesman, 2002)

Infertility: 'disease of social relations' (Neff, 1994, p477)

- Infertility affects relationships between:
 - Community members
 - Relatives
 - Spouses: **Divorce, polygamy, affairs** (Dyer et al, 2002; Gerrits et al., 1997; Papreen, 2000)

NB. Health issues!

How do people interpret changes in marital relationships?

Overview



Infertility and relationships in resource-poor settings



Methodology of study of infertility in Malawi



Analysis of Malawian women's descriptions of marital affairs



Implications

Discourse analysis (DA) of constructions of (extra) marital relationships

- Semi-structured interviews with:
 - Malawian men (7) and women (14) with a fertility problem
- Most interviews in English, 1/3 of interviews conducted with help of interpreter
- Translations obtained of interactions between respondents and interpreters

Discourse analysis (DA) of constructions of (extra) marital relationships

DA (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wiggins & Potter, 2007):

- Detailed analysis of shared 'ways of talking'
- Patterns in *what* people say and *how* they say it.

- Identifies effects of descriptions :
 - Descriptions construct realities.
 - Descriptions perform social actions (e.g. justifying, blaming)

Overview



The problem of infertility in resource-poor settings and its consequences for relationships



Methodological & analytic approach (discourse analysis)



Analysis of Malawian women's descriptions of marital affairs



Implications

- a. Interventions for infertility
- b. SRH interventions



I. Descriptions of affairs minimize their significance

- Features which play down affairs significance:
 1. 'not much' (ex. 1 line 174)
 2. Relegating to the past
 3. Framing affair as 'just' a relationship
 4. Normalizing affairs (script formulation)
 5. Constructing affairs as impersonal (script formulation, 'here and there', 'women', instrumental motivation)
 6. Constructing their relationship as good regardless of affair

Overview



Infertility and relationships in resource-poor settings



Methodology



Analysis of Malawian women's descriptions of marital affairs



Conclusions and implications

Discrepancies between respondents' and academics' accounts

Respondents	Literature
Construct relationships as good	Portrays infertility as, overall, bad for people's relationships
<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Mitigate the seriousness of extramarital affairs, and construct relationships as good regardless of affairs•Avoid complaining about & blaming others for troubles	Portrays affairs, polygamy and divorce as one of the main hardships which infertile women endure.

Discrepancies between academics and respondents' accounts

- Academics' accounts fulfil a useful political function: give voice to suffering
- **But** not necessarily in line with people's own constructions of (extra-) marital relationships (cf. Widdicombe, 1995).
- Interventions should be based on/address people's own interpretations/constructions.

'Ways of talking' about affairs seem disempowering

- Constructions of relationships and affairs may prevent 'acting out' and 'standing up'
- Social interventions: Create space for alternative constructions.
- But: minimizing the importance of affairs may be necessary coping style for vulnerable women within resource-poor settings?

Linking sex, relationships, and context

CONTEXT

SRH

Sexual behaviours
(e.g. in response to infertility)

Meanings and constructions of
relationships

Issues at stake

Families and coping with adversity in resource-poor settings

This workshop seeks to stimulate reflection on:

- a. Families and relationships from an international perspective, with a focus on resource-poor settings
- b. How to integrate families and relationships in work on sexual and reproductive health in resource-poor settings