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Comments

Presented at the 5th Meeting of the Copenhagen Multi-Centre Psychosocial Infertility (COMPI) Research Program, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark, in 2011.

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A Typology of Coping in Couples Undergoing Fertility Treatment

Brennan Peterson, Ph.D., Matthew Pirritano, Ph.D., & Lone Schmidt, D.M.Sci, Ph.D.

Study Questions

Can a data analytic technique called cluster analysis be used to identify clinically meaningful groups of infertile couples based on their coping profiles prior to obtaining infertility treatments?

Can such profiles be useful for medical and mental health professionals in the counseling of infertile couples?

What is Known Already

Individuals undergoing infertility treatment can experience psychological distress and disruptions to their personal, relational, and social lives.

The way couples cope with the experience of infertility is related to individual distress.

Coping strategies adopted by one's partner have been found to be related to the levels of stress experienced by the other partner.

No previous studies have developed typologies of couples based on infertility coping strategies.

Study Design, Size, Duration

Cross-sectional baseline study using longitudinal cohort among consecutive patients seeking treatment at fertility clinics in Denmark using the Copenhagen Multi-centre Psychosocial Infertility (COMPI) Research Programme.

Participants were recruited January 2000-August 2001, responding to questionnaires immediately before treatment initiation, at 1-year follow-up, and 5-year follow-up. Response rate at baseline 80.0% (N=2250).

Participants, Material, & Methods

In total, 941 couples were included from the baseline sample.

Measures were adapted from the Ways of Coping Questionnaire, and The Fertility Problem Stress Inventory.

Hierarchical cluster analysis – a data analytic technique which bridges the gap between quantitative and qualitative approaches - was chosen to establish the number of clusters.

Main Results

The analysis revealed six valid clusters of couples which were characterized as follows:

Cluster 1 “Low-Coping Couples” (n=194 couples)

Cluster 2 “Avoidant Men with Confronting Women” (n=154 couples)

Cluster 3 “Actively-Avoidant Low-Confronting Couples” (n=116 couples)

Cluster 4 “Passively-Avoidant and Low Meaning-based Couples” (n=169 couples)

Cluster 5 “Passively-Avoidant and High Meaning-based Couples” (n=154 couples)

Cluster 6 “Avoidant Women in High Meaning-Based Couples” (n=154 couples)

- In all clusters men were significantly older than women
- In all clusters, women had higher coping scores than men.
- Cluster 2 seemed to be particularly problematic as couples in this group reported higher personal distress, marital distress, and social distress compared to other clusters.

Study Implications

The identification of a cluster of avoidant men with confronting women seems to be of particular note given its relationship to increased personal, marital, and social distress.

The identification of couple groupings and their coping patterns can help medical and mental health professionals identify couples at risk for increased infertility-related distress.

Mental health professionals in the field of infertility counseling can use these findings to develop targeted therapeutic techniques to help treat couples experiencing infertility-related distress.

Findings from this study are limited in their generalizability due to the cross-sectional study design.

Results need to be replicated as replication is the strongest method to establish the validity of clusters.

Study Funding/Competing Interests

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