Infertility Stigma, Openness With Others, and Their Relationship to Depression and Meaning in Life Among Men and Women Experiencing Infertility

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Study Question

- Does infertility-related stigma and being open with others relate to depression and meaning in life among men and women experiencing infertility?

Summary Answer

- Higher infertility stigma was related to higher depression and search for meaning, whereas higher openness was related to lower depression and higher presence of meaning.

What is Known

- For women, higher levels of infertility stigma is associated with increased hopelessness (Kaya & Oskay, 2020).
- Less is known about how stigma and meaning are related to depression in men.
- Men who report greater openness with others about infertility reported lower depression (Babore et al., 2017).
- Presence of meaning in women is associated with adaptive coping strategies for infertility, while search for meaning is associated with higher depression (Morse & Steger, 2019).

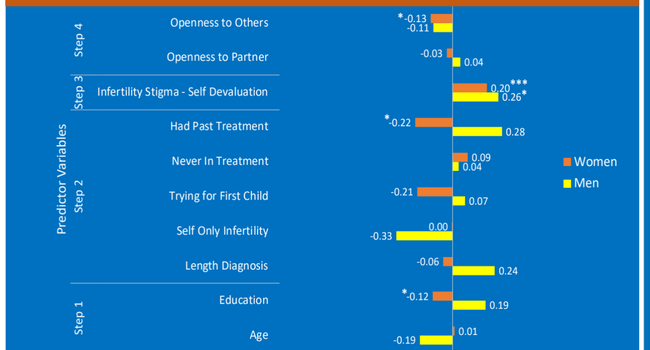
Design & Participants

- Cross-sectional study design
- Participants recruited via *Uniquely Knitted* social media & alumni (U.S. based non-profit organization offering therapist led process groups to support the infertility community)
- Data collected November-December 2023
- Participants: N=458 female and N=89 male
- Mean age=33 years (SD=5.0)
- 86% White, 5% Latino, 4% Asian, 5% Other
- 50% college degree, 39% advanced degree
- 81% U.S., 7% Europe, 7% Canada

Measures

1. Demographic and Infertility History
   - Age, gender, race, education, country
   - Treatment history
   - Infertility diagnosis
2. *Infertility Stigma Scale* (7-item personal devaluation sub-scale; Fu et al., 2015)
   - My infertility makes me feel like a failure
   - I am ashamed of my infertility
3. *Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Measure* (10-item; Zhang et al., 2012)
   - I felt lonely
   - I was bothered by things that usually don't bother me
   - I felt that everything I did was an effort
4. *Meaning in Life Measure* (two 5-item sub-scales, *Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning* (Steger et al., 2006)
   - I understand my life's meaning (p)
   - I am searching for meaning in my life (s)
5. *Openness with Others Scale* (8-Item; Babore et al., 2017)
   - I share all my problems with my family
   - I have no difficulties sharing all my problems with my friends

Figure 2 Multiple Regression Predicting *Search for Meaning* in Men (R^2=.22)* & Women (R^2=.16)***



Results

- Multiple linear hierarchical regression models explained substantial variance (adjusted R-squared) for depression (48% men; 29% women), presence of meaning (28% men; 27% women), and search for meaning (22% men; 16% women).

Figure 1 Multiple Regression Predicting *Depression* in Men (R^2=.48)* & Women (R^2=.29)*****

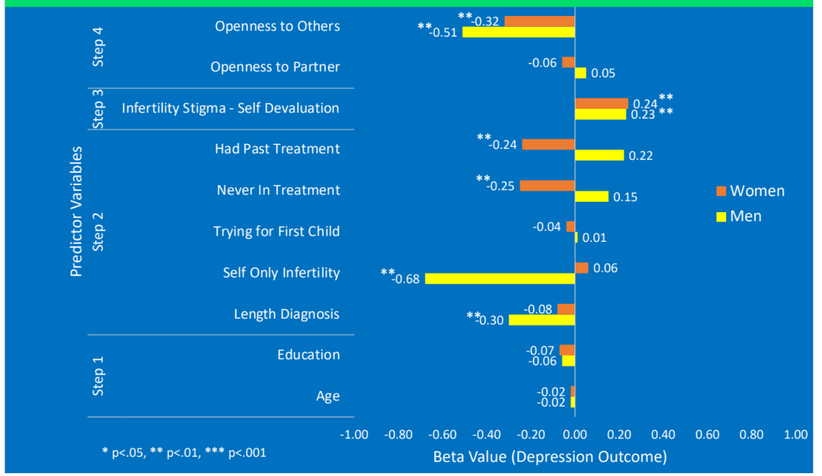
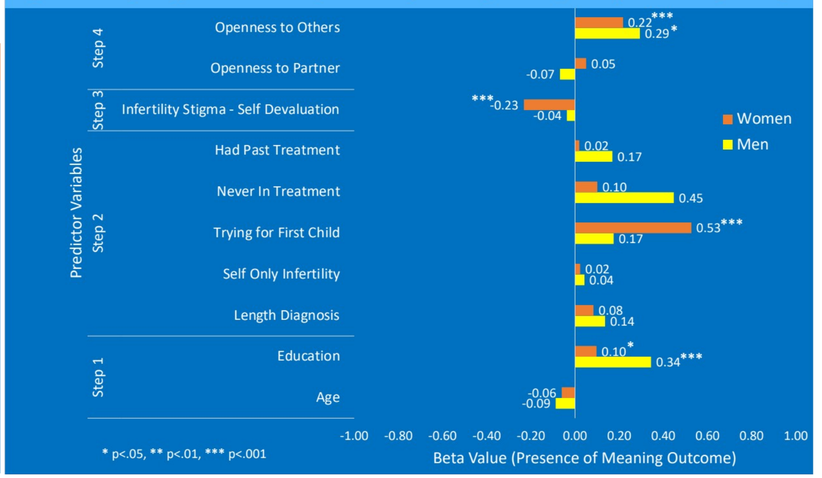


Figure 3 Multiple Regression Predicting *Presence of Meaning* in Men (R^2=.28) & Women (R^2=.27)*****



Results

- The inclusion of stigma and openness variables explained substantially greater variance in the outcome variables compared to models only including demographics and infertility variables.

Stigma – Self Devaluation

- For both men and women, higher levels of personal infertility stigma was associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms (*Fig. 1*), and search for meaning (*Fig. 2*). For women, higher stigma was associated with lower presence of meaning (*Fig. 3*)

Openness With Others

- For both men and women, higher levels of openness with others about infertility was related to lower depressive symptoms (*Fig. 1*) and greater presence of meaning in life (*Fig. 3*). For women, openness with others was associated with lower search for meaning (*Fig. 2*)

Treatment History & Depressive Symptoms

- Women currently in treatment reported more depressive symptoms compared to both women who were never in treatment (β=-.25), and women who had previously been in treatment (β=-.24, Fig 1)

Implications

- The study highlights that higher infertility stigma and lower openness with others are key factors in understanding men and women's mental health and worldview perceptions.
- An unwillingness to be open about infertility with others could potentially be an early warning sign for depressive symptoms & search for meaning.
- Encouraging individuals with infertility to share their experiences with others may reduce feelings of depression, while also increasing one's sense of meaning in life.

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare