

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate and describe men's and women's experience of involuntary childlessness. It is hoped that this description will contribute to a deeper understanding of the psycho-social difficulties involved in the area of infertility for those who, by the nature of their work, are confronted with this problem.

A longitudinal study where 31 couples were followed over a two year period was carried out. The data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. Each person was interviewed individually on two separate occasions with an interval of two years.

The focus of the study is:

1. When does the subjective experience of childlessness start and for whom?
2. How do men and women react and adapt to the situation of involuntary childlessness?
3. How is the couple's relationship affected? How do the couple communicate around their childlessness? Are there gender specific differences?
4. How is the couple's relationship with their social network affected?
5. How do men and women describe their interaction with the medical system?

The results reveal that the experience of involuntary childlessness often contains many difficulties - amongst them the feeling of loss - that can best be described as a crisis. This crisis tends to be precipitated about a year after contact with medical authorities. An analysis of the differences between sexes demonstrates that there are differences between men and women in their ways of experiencing and dealing with the crisis. Women tend to experience their difficulties in all aspects of life, including their relationship to members of their social network, while men tend to experience their childlessness in relation to their partner. Simplified one could say that women tend to react to their childlessness, while men tend to react to their wife's reactions.

Through the interview-subject's descriptions of their interaction with the medical authorities it became clear how the relationship between doctor and patient has great importance for them, from both a medical and a psycho-social perspective. The doctor often became a very central person in the childless couple's life, partly because he was identified by them as the helping-agent, and partly because the nature of the problem is such that it easily leads to social isolation: as a result, the doctor is often the only person with whom the couple discuss their difficulties.

There was a great deal of variation in the ways in which the people in the study adapted to the situation of involuntary childlessness. One clear pattern was that women tended to both react and adapt earlier than men, a result of the fact that most men first responded to their wife's state, rather than considering what childlessness meant for them personally.

The findings in this study suggests that the experience of infertility and childlessness generates psycho-social problems to such a degree that couples who seek medical help in this area should generally be offered some kind of counselling or support as part of the infertility-investigation and treatment-plan.

Key words: infertility, childlessness, psychological reactions, crisis, sexuality, male and female, couples, gender, medical-systems, doctor/patient -relationship, adaption.