

One journey, two worlds: How Couples perceive their Interpersonal Communication Experiences with Infertility – A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on a study that examined how couples experiencing infertility exchange messages at an interpersonal level. It addresses the question: How do couples living with infertility perceive their interpersonal communication about their status? Using hermeneutic phenomenology, five couples were sampled purposively, and data generated using in-depth conversational interviews and analysed using reflexive analysis. Findings demonstrate that couples perceive their communication about infertility on two fronts: at a personal level and a societal level, with society playing a dual role of both hurting and relieving couples of the pain of infertility through their words. The study concludes that the lack of sustained and deliberate interpersonal communication accounts for most of the suffering couples living with infertility endure. It calls for policymakers to infuse communicative etiquette, ethics, and soft-skill competencies throughout the educational curriculum to ensure that all citizens can recognize sensitive interpersonal situations with awareness, restraint, and empathy.

Keywords: couples; infertility; interpersonal communication; Kenya; phenomenology.

Introduction

Interpersonal communication is the lifeblood of intimate relationships. For couples facing serious challenges such as infertility that affects one in every six couples (WHO, 2023), communication competencies are not a luxury. The ability of couples to sustain their union rests fundamentally upon the quality of their interpersonal communication. The quality of their interpersonal communication determines their resilience during hard times. Yet adults now spend only 39 minutes per day in direct conversation, with face-to-face communication declining by 30 percent among adults and 45 percent among adolescents between 2003 and 2022 (Bauer, 2026). This paper is based on a study that investigated interpersonal communication of the lived experiences among couples with infertility. It explores how couples with infertility perceive their interpersonal communication. Conducted in Nairobi, Kenya, the study was of interest because interpersonal communication is central to human

societies, yet the ability to spend time together, establish rapport, and improve trust no longer comes naturally.

The absence of direct interaction reduces relationship quality and eliminates essential nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions and body language, which are foundational to building trust and empathy (Bratina, 2023). Moreover, with face-to-face contact steadily decreasing, individuals increasingly perceive online social contact as a substitute, leading to higher levels of loneliness. This reduction in social presence is linked to increased emotional distance and a higher frequency of miscommunication, challenging traditional frameworks for establishing deep, meaningful connections (J. O. K, 2025). Consequently, this trend has resulted in a global pandemic of interpersonal communication. There is a decline in the depth and frequency of meaningful human connection, prompting the current study (Stieger et al., 2023).

Infertility remains a taboo subject within the Kenyan context, with the subject rarely discussed in public discourse (Chimbatata and Malimba, 2016; Njogu et al., 2022). The result is that there is a high suppression of discussions around the phenomenon. Yet, the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) records a steady decline in Kenya's total fertility rate of 3.3% between 1989 and 2022 (from 6.7% to 3.4%). Nairobi County records the lowest fertility rate in the country, with an average of 2.5 children (KNBS, 2024).

Literature Review

Interpersonal communication is a face to face/person to person interaction between individuals. Its main aim is to offer social support. While some scholars define interpersonal communication based on the number of participants or situation at hand, others look at the proximity of the individuals involved (Dainton & Zelle, 2010). Interpersonal communication skill is essential for human relations. It is needed for the maintenance and development of personal relationships as well as social systems such as family, friends, community, and in the workplace. It influences the effective communication in understanding messages, delivering information and exchanging ideas. Interpersonal communication permits people to express their thoughts, opinions, attitudes and knowledge face to face, both verbally and non-verbally. Interpersonal communication is not just about what is said and what is received, but it is also about how it is expressed in body language and facial expression (Koenig, et al., 2015).

Peterson and Green (2009) opine that communication between couples is extremely important as it permits the expression of needs, wants and concerns to each other. According to them, the process is not only about the content of the communication, but also about how it is said and about the strategies

used to send the messages. They further state that communication necessitates problem solving in all families because through it, several problems are brought up, sorted and decisions made. In a marriage, communication and its quality determine how well the couple is in tune with the needs of each other and whether their bond has any effects on the kind of parenthood they practise.

Williamson et al. (2012) emphasise the need for consistent communication that includes clear verbalisation of what one is thinking, feeling and experiencing. According to the scholars, inconsistent communication is unambiguous, indirect communication and is typical for spouses who have disrupted family and marital relations. In the same vein, Dalgeish et al, (2015) support this assertion by arguing that when the level of communication does not match, problems that disrupt the marital psychodynamics and its functionality are likely to erupt.

A study by Loscocco and Walzer (2013) distinguishes “happy” and “unhappy couples” through their quality of communication. According to them, happy partners communicate openly and honestly, attempt to solve problems, share their opinion, as well as show mutual understanding, emotion, tolerance, and honesty. Moreover, DeMaris, Mahoney and Pargament (2010) second them by arguing that lack of paying attention to each other’s words and feelings is a prerequisite for depreciating communication. They advise couples to maintain interpersonal communication through:

‘knowing the right time to talk, having a warm tone, learning to be positive with the talk, understanding what the other person needs and feels, respecting the other person’s thoughts, talking specifically without ambiguity, and learning how to converse more’ (pg. 134)

Yet, the landscape within which couples communicate has undergone transformation. There is scholarly evidence that the quantity and quality of interpersonal interactions have declined significantly over the past two decades (Pfeifer & Mehl, 2026). The decline demonstrates a structural shift in how people communicate, with consequences for relational health. For couples, this loss is dangerous as they rely on communication to share all aspects of their lives. When compromised, the very architecture of the partnership becomes unstable. Communication has declined by 30 percent among adults and 45 percent among teenagers (Bauer, 2026).

Methodology

Due to the emphasis on lived experience, the study was informed by the relativist-interpretivist philosophical paradigm. A qualitative research approach was adopted, and the phenomenological method was used through in-depth interviews to explore how couples perceive their lived experiences with communicating infertility (van Manen, 2017). The study was conducted between January and July 2025 in Nairobi County, which records the lowest fertility rate in Kenya, with an average of 2.5

children (KNBS, 2024). Six participants, including three males and three females, all living within a heterosexual marriage relationship, were selected to participate in the study. Participants were selected through snowballing, which was employed with initial participants used to identify others undergoing similar challenges.

The conversational interview was employed as the primary method of data collection to elicit the genuine views and feelings of the participants regarding how they communicate about infertility. Observations were made during the interview process to supplement the conversations and enhance the credibility of the study (Ong'ondo & Jwan, 2020). The interviews were conducted sequentially in three stages. The first interview was aimed at building rapport and contextualising the participant's experiences, the second, which was the main, delved into understanding how the participants communicate their experiences, while the third was meant to clarify and reflect on the meaning of the participants' experiences with communicating infertility. Each interview lasted approximately one to two hours. Interviews were audio-recorded and comprehensive notes taken throughout the process.

Information obtained from the study was analysed thematically following Ong'ondo & Jwan's (2020) six-point procedure of transcription, re-familiarisation with the data, the three-level coding process, and production of the report. Throughout the study, relevant ethical considerations, including confidentiality, privacy, and making every effort to ensure participants were not put at risk of harm by sharing their experiences, were upheld. The study guaranteed trustworthiness to ensure the research process was honest, careful, and rigorous enough to make the claims it does. Specifically, the study drew participants from various demographics within the country's capital, ensuring source triangulation through drawing on the unique and varied experiences with infertility. The study also ensured dependability by using thick, detailed descriptions to demonstrate interpersonal communication of the lived experiences of couples living with infertility.

Findings

The challenges and interactions of couples play a huge role in determining how they perceive their communication about infertility. Participant conversations reveal that communication about infertility among couples adopts various methodologies, tones, depths, and boundaries. It is perceived on two fronts: at a personal level and a societal level.

Perceptions of interpersonal communication at a personal level

At a personal level, participants had the following views on their communication on infertility issues:

Interpersonal communication a lonely affair

The majority of participants opined that interpersonal communication about infertility between couples is a lonely affair. On many occasions, they have felt that not even their partner fully

understands the depth of their struggles. Although some have attempted to share their frustration with their spouses, some, especially male participants, expressed a sense of isolation, feeling that their partners could not truly grasp the emotional and psychological weight they carried. In their view, because women bear the responsibility of carrying the pregnancy and are more targeted with discomfort such as societal norms and stigma surrounding reproduction, the feelings of their male partners are often diminished.

Similarly, female participants were of the view that their male partners cannot fully grasp their suffering, yet they bear the brunt of procreative silence within society. The study augments this lack of genuine understanding as a phenomenon that creates a barrier to meaningful communication between couples, as they become reluctant to open up about their feelings for fear of being dismissed or misunderstood. Participants resonated strongly with the view that the experience of infertility is increasingly isolating, leaving them to grapple with their pain in silence.

One of the hardest thing about infertility is that nobody gets it. Sometimes not even the closest person who is your wife. They can't just get it. They can't know exactly how you feel about it even if you were to share. So I just decide to stay mum. Let me just keep quiet and have my own thoughts or deal with my own problems

Interpersonal communication equated to misunderstanding

Couples going through the challenges of infertility experience moments of tension as they engage in discussions, sometimes leading to misunderstanding. Participants reflected on their experience, stating that they sometimes struggle to articulate their feelings and needs effectively, leading to confusion and misinterpretation. The disconnect manifests in various ways, including vague language and unintentional accusations from partners, creating rifts between them and exacerbating the already difficult times they endure. Some participants noted that they have become more distant as the relationship progresses, with conversations often leading to misinterpretation and conflicts.

Some participants indicated that discussions sometimes end up in blame games, with each partner shifting responsibility onto the other for their circumstances. In such a scenario, the atmosphere is charged, and instead of couples engaging in constructive dialogue, frustration manifests as accusations and deflections. The findings confirm that while some partners attempt to sidestep the issue entirely, others use these conversations as an opportunity to vent their frustrations, often resulting in hurtful comments that reference the other's past decisions or family background. Eventually, the cycle of blame and defensiveness undermines the chances for meaningful communication and connection, pushing couples further apart.

Our conversations sometimes involved wondering how infertility came about. We spent time trying to discover who in either of our families had no children. I remember at one time my wife out of nowhere just asks me, might

you have anyone in your family who never got a child? First I was like where is that coming from? Then she was like am just asking, maybe we can get to know what the issue is. Actually this is not something I had ever thought about. Was she trying to say the issue could be inherited? And that is what eventually led to our misunderstanding

Interpersonal communication shrouded in secrecy

Interpersonal communication about infertility is often covered in secrecy, with couples feeling the need to keep their struggles private. Many participants reported struggling with the decision of whom to inform about their infertility journey and when to share such intimate details, putting more pressure on their lives. Participants conveyed that their need for secrecy is frequently motivated by fears of judgment, insensitive reactions, and the inability of others to grasp the complexity of their situation. As a result, most participants held prior discussions with their spouses to agree on whom to engage in such vulnerable conversations. There is evidence that the secrecy leads to feelings of isolation, as individuals find themselves struggling with their infertility-related frustrations without a support network, further complicating their emotional experiences. Participants further reported struggling to act normally by pretending all was well so as not to open up regarding infertility issues.

Interpersonal communication manifests through grief

Study participants agreed that grief is a central part of their communication when discussing issues around infertility. Whether male or female, participants shared insights regarding their experience of loss as a particularly pronounced part of their lives. In their words, various experiences in life made them grieve over their situation. Such experiences include encounters that remind them of their unfulfilled desire for parenthood, such as family gatherings, weddings, and baby showers, where the joy of others serves as reminders of their own pain. Following these moments, couples frequently return home to process their feelings, grieving their unfulfilled dreams of procreation in a deeply emotional and intimate way.

While some managed to articulate their sorrow verbally, sharing their thoughts and feelings with their spouse, there is evidence that more often, this communication takes on a non-verbal form. Participants found themselves exchanging glances filled with understanding or embracing in silence, allowing the weight of their grief to be felt without the need for words. In the long run, participants could communicate their shared pain while mourning together in the midst of their struggles.

The truth is sometimes we cried together, while other times I cried alone. Especially when my wife had a miscarriage under my very eyes, I cried literally. I don't even think she had ever seen me crying, but I couldn't hold the tears that day. The pain was just too much because we were really looking forward to holding that child. So, so much. So when we came home from the hospital that day, we just sat there crying together like two fools (smiles). Nobody spoke. What could I have said? I didn't have the strength, let alone the words to tell her. And I

believe she felt the same. Because she just looked at me with tears rolling down her eyes. It's really been a tough, tough journey

Worth noting is that some participants confessed that they struggle to balance their own anxiety and sadness in the face of infertility, often finding themselves overwhelmed by the emotions that accompany their journey. For them, the burden of unfulfilled dreams and the pressure to conceive creates an internal conflict that often feels impossible to get through. They articulated that in moments of despair, they have thrown up their hands in resignation, acknowledging that there are aspects of their situation they simply cannot control or sort out, leading them to adopt a mindset of acceptance. They have come to terms with the idea that, at times, it is necessary to let go and allow certain feelings to rest, rather than constantly battling against the tide of their emotions.

It's a mixed feeling. Sometimes sort of liberating, other times really painful because when you get to a level of acceptance, it's like you admit that some things are not within your power. That you cannot do it on your own. That some things are beyond you. And it's during such moments that your soul heals. But do you think it lasts? No it doesn't. Many times it's overwhelming for me. The pressure is just too much. The hurt way beyond anything I can explain. You want to be a mother so bad, you can't just help it. And it's during such moments that the anxiety just overtakes me

Interpersonal communication full of avoidance

Participants expressed the view that their interpersonal communication, as well as that of their spouses, was largely characterised by avoidance. Discussions revealed a tendency to evade tough conversations surrounding infertility, as a way of escaping the emotional discomfort associated with the topic. Some participants reported that they would actively procrastinate engaging with their spouses about their struggles, arguing that it happened as a way of avoiding the hurt associated with infertility. They feared that open conversations would lead to more hurtful feelings or worsen existing tensions. In the end, avoidance would stifle important dialogue as couples are reluctant to engage in candid conversations.

So, I don't think we've explored this topic much. We haven't explored it the way it's supposed to be. Because of the nature and how personal it is. This is not like a sickness or a disease where you just go and tell the doctor, I'm suffering from a flu, I need medication. So, yeah, and also the stigma attached to it. So, you really don't want to confront it (A1)

Interpersonal communication is dynamic

Conversations around infertility issues keep changing depending on the stage of the marriage. In the formative years of marriage, most reported more open and frequent engagements as couples discussed their plans for starting a family, including the number of children they hoped to have and the dreams they held for their future together. These conversations often fueled excitement and nurtured a sense of

connection between couples. In the view of some participants, communication is more open as couples discuss issues with enthusiasm. However, as the reality of infertility set in, the topic of children gradually faded from their discussions. The once-vibrant conversations about family plans diminished, replaced by an unspoken acknowledgment of the pain and disappointment that participants faced. Couples began to communicate less about their hopes for children, reflecting a shift from optimistic dreams to a more subdued and cautious approach.

It's been nine years. But when I look back, I still want to be taken to those early years when we first met. I remember we could talk about anything. We didn't fear each other like we do now. I honestly don't know whether to call it fear or it's something else. Because we were so open even about our plans of having children and stuff. Fast forward to now. Nobody wants to touch that delicate topic. It's like it's a constant reminder of shattered dreams. Of hopes that die slowly by the day. Our conversations have really changed, honestly. Sad, but true

Perceptions of interpersonal communication at the societal level

During their infertility journey, participants encountered a range of societal messages, some from well-meaning individuals, but others were misguided advice from friends and family. The way in which members of society communicated with them enhanced the participants' relationships with their spouses, while at the same time leading to feelings of exclusion, disconnection, and misunderstanding. Findings from the study demonstrate what feelings these conversations elicited from the participants, and how these discussions influenced how couples communicate and address their challenges.

Dual communication of social networks

The social network of couples unable to achieve pregnancy plays a critical role in determining the discussions around infertility. Participants noted that their social networks, including friends, colleagues, and family, play a double role in the lives of couples living with infertility, offering both support and judgement in varying measures. Study participants were of the view that at times, supportive comments from loved ones helped to alleviate some of the stress they endured during their journey.

We have a very supporting couple friend of ours, who have walked with journey with us since, and I can say have helped us stick together. Remember I told you we had separated at some point? Yes. You have no idea how many meetings they organised to have us talk about our issues, some even without us knowing. They encouraged us to pray together, something that has become a habit and has always pushed us to speak. Even when we don't want to talk, we always have to come together to pray before we sleep, and you know, that somehow pushes you to talk about some of these issues.

However, these same participants also expressed frustration with the judgmental and discouraging remarks that occasionally emerged from their social circles. Comments that trivialised their struggles, questioned their choices, or expressed impatience with their situation contributed to feelings of inadequacy and isolation. One key observation, according to study participants, was the use of negative language to refer to infertile individuals, which participants perceived as condescending, derogatory, and inherently unfair. Such terminology carried a heavy emotional weight and contributed to a culture of stigma surrounding infertility. For instance, a participant emotionally recalls how she was referred to directly as ‘japong’o choo’ by some relatives in a family function. The term translated as ‘the one who fills the toilet’ implied that, instead of producing children, she was merely excreting waste and filling the toilet.

Another recalls how some colleagues jokingly referred to her as ‘the one who tears the sheets’, to suggest that she had nothing to show for the intimacy shared with her partner since she got married, except for damaged bedsheets. Another claimed that she overheard a conversation between one of her aunties and her sister, where the aunt referred to her as ‘soon’, asking ‘and what is that soon up to this time? She’s been so quiet lately’. Soon in this context was used to refer to ‘the barren one’.

Even colleagues at work can sometimes just be something else. Sometimes, out of nowhere, they just ask you insensitive questions. Like, when are you bringing us a child? Why are you taking too long? We are waiting...how come you just keep ‘tearing sheets’ yet nothing comes out of it?

Men were not left behind, as they were often belittled when referred to as ‘boys’ rather than men, undermining their sense of masculinity and worth. Furthermore, another participant shared how he was ridiculed by some friends one time during a sports event, as they claimed that although he was well built with long beards, ‘*he did not have wings*’. He recounts how broken he was as his friends implied that he was incapable of producing viable sperm to sire a child, an irony of his physique, magnifying his feelings of inadequacy. While reflecting on such instances, study participants were of the view that the society worsened their pain through their diction that perpetuated harmful stereotypes and affected their self-esteem.

We were busy practising for a volleyball match. Sometimes when I am free, I usually play volleyball to pass the time. Then one of my friends makes a comment and says, eh, nowadays your muscles are really coming up. You are so well built as compared to the last time I saw you...before he could even finish, this one out of nowhere comes to say, ‘so now, what’s the point of being so well built, with such bushy beards when you do not have wings?’. You know everyone was quiet, including me. At first, before it sank in properly, I was like, what is this one even saying, surely. I could have done something really bad to that guy, except for my friends who shut him down really fast and cautioned him not to ever talk so carelessly again. So really, what’s the point of discussing anything with people who can be so careless with their words? In fact, sometimes I don’t quite understand us

Kenyans. Is it ignorance, or I sit just malice, because even my wife has told me very bad things regarding some comments she has heard from people.

Dual communication of clinical voices

Worth noting is that participants felt that even medical professionals contributed to their pain regarding infertility. While they are very important in assisting couples living with infertility through their struggles, many participants expressed concerns about the insensitivity of the language used by these professionals, particularly when communicating difficult news or treatment options. Rather than conveying messages with the empathy and sensitivity that such emotionally charged situations warrant, some medics utilised clinical language that felt cold and impersonal, thereby deepening the participants' feelings of distress.

Then it got to our turn. I was literally shaking. Actually, when we got in the doctor just laughed and asked why do you guys look so tensed? (Laughs). My hubby just handed over the results without saying much. I looked away by the way as he was looking at the films. I didn't want to look at him lest I see disappointment on his face. Then suddenly he said, we have seen worse things than this...maybe you're not doing a good job and you need to work harder. And you mama, (looking at me), what is stopping you from carrying a child because I can't see it.

Some participants were of the opinion that the doctors took serious matters too lightly and even went ahead to joke about them, in the process hurting their emotions through their choice of words. They recounted experiences where the delivery of not-so-good news lacked the compassion necessary to soften the blow, leaving them feeling more vulnerable and isolated in their pain. Yet for others, it was the lack of sensitivity in asking questions, especially when a partner had not fully revealed their pasts to their spouses.

Well, he was like, sometimes it happens. Sometimes due to unexplained reasons. So, let's just say it's not yet time. So, you go back and do the work. The ball is now on your court, because so far am not seeing much. But maybe before I conclude, we may have to check you out – it's rare, but it's important that we just ensure everything is okay (looking at my hubby). I want to be sure so that when I send you to go back to work then we know that we're safe. I looked at my hubby's face and realised he was just staring at the doctor blankly. It's like he was shocked that it's his turn to get checked (laughs slightly).

Discussion

Study findings demonstrate that couples perceive their communication on two fronts: at a personal level and a societal level.

At a personal level, interpersonal communication is buried in secrecy, with couples feeling the need to keep their struggles private for fear of judgement, insensitive reactions, and an inability for spouse to

fully grasp their struggles. As a result, interpersonal communication is perceived as a lonely affair, with women viewing themselves as primary initiators of communication, and men wondering why women cannot communicate in a manageable manner. These findings align with documented evidence by Hawkey and colleagues (2021), who observe that in difficult situations, partners tend to ‘self-silence’ for fear of upsetting their partners. Moreover, interpersonal communication is viewed as full of avoidance, with partners tending to evade tough conversations either through engaging in sporting activities, coming home late, or avoiding certain spaces such as the bedroom – likely to trigger discussions around infertility. Palmer-Wackerly & Krieger (2014) opine that during threatening topics, couples are notorious for using metaphors, a situation they term as ‘dancing around infertility’. This study highlights that society, including family, colleagues, friends and the medical fraternity, plays a central role in determining how couples communicate about infertility interpersonally. They largely impose the feeling of being infertile through their messages; usually casual remarks and jokes, unsolicited advice and name-calling. Although they are sometimes supportive through offering empathetic messages, the study notes that in most cases, their remarks negatively affect the interpersonal communication among couples with infertility. Shephyr and colleagues (2024), however, point out the value of emotional support through support groups that offer counselling, mentioning the critical role the groups play in the lives of couples enduring challenging situations.

Conclusion

Interpersonal communication is dwindling both in quantity and quality. Within the marriage set-up, couples have different perceptions about how they communicate interpersonally. Although society plays a critical role in shaping how couples talk to each other, couples also feel their spouses barely understand the depth of what they endure, resulting in the inability to communicate effectively. As a result, the lack of sustained and deliberate interpersonal communication accounts for most of the suffering couples living with infertility endure.

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The author(s) declare that it is not applicable.

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Competing interests

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