The Role of Therapists in Supporting Women Seeking Pregnancy Through In Vitro Fertilization (IVF): A Systematic Review

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Abstract-
Background and Objective: This review paper synthesizes and analyzes relevant research studies and articles on the role of therapists for women seeking pregnancy through IVF. IVF is a complex and emotionally challenging journey, and the role of therapists in providing emotional and psychological support, has been extensively explored in recent years. Therapists assist in managing expectations, making difficult decisions, and navigating grief and loss.
Methods: The PRISMA statement principles were followed for conducting this systematic review (Moher et al., 2009). Databases were searched, duplicate publications were removed while accounting for biases, and results were then synthesized and presented in accordance with PRISMA criteria in order to identify and ultimately include papers in this review (Moher et al., 2009). On Scopus, Google Scholar, and Web of Sciences, research studies published between the years 2000 and 2022 were looked up. The terms "IVF" and "psychotherapist," "therapist," "clinical psychologist," and "mental health professional" were combined as keywords in this article, along with phrases like "Mental Health in IVF Women" and "IVF Women Well-Being."
Results: The systematic review comprised 29 papers. The available literature emphasizes a requirement for more research on mental health of women seeking pregnancy through IVF, particularly to understand the role of a therapist in the lives of this population. This review highlights key findings and insights from the researches, emphasizing the critical role therapists play in enhancing the IVF experience and potentially improving treatment outcomes.
Conclusion: This review also underscores the importance of integrating therapy or counseling into the fertility journey of women seeking pregnancy through IVF, ultimately enhancing the overall IVF experience and potentially improving treatment outcomes. While the impact of therapy on IVF outcomes requires further investigation, it is evident that therapists contribute significantly to the emotional and psychological well-being of individuals undergoing fertility treatments.

Keywords: **In-vitro fertilization, Assisted Pregnancy, Mental-health, Therapist, Counseling.**

INTRODUCTION

Infertile couples usually resort to IVF treatment only after they have exhausted other options. Although IVF provides new hope to these couples, it also brings a great burden because it poses a complex range of difficulties in a number of areas. As each treatment cycle is characterized by a cyclical oscillation of optimism and disappointment, IVF is emotionally accompanied with considerable psychological stress. Under the emotional strain of IVF, interpersonal ties may become strained, demanding open communication and support. In recent years, the emotional and psychological well-being of women seeking pregnancy through IVF has become a subject of extensive research. The high expenses of IVF treatments and drugs are noticeable financial limitations. IVF is physiologically required to administer exogenous hormones through injections, which can result in adverse effects like mood swings and physical pain for the patient. Daily schedules are disrupted by the time commitment of IVF, which is characterized by many clinic visits, monitoring appointments, and waiting times between cycles. The journey of IVF can be very trying, emotionally draining and expensive for most couples **(Times of India editorial, 2020).**

Additionally, there is uncertainty surrounding IVF success rates as it range from 18.4 to 20.3% (for frozen embryo transfer and fresh aspiration, respectively) depending on the mother's age and the underlying reason of infertility **(Ishihara, 2015)**. The success rate of IVF in India varies within the range of **30% and 35%** every embryo transfer. This implies that Most of the couples don't succeed in their earlier attempts of the process **(Times of India editorial, 2020)**.

Through the use of recently developed self-administered screening instruments that can provide useful interpretations for patient care, mental health practitioners can offer appropriate interventions to reduce stress and enhance patient care **(Boivin, 2012; Verhaak, 2010)**. Additionally, it's crucial for them to know which kind of infertility counseling is ideal for them as individuals or as a couple given their circumstances in order to get the finest care available. According to international recommendations **(Boivin et al., 2002)**, infertility counseling differs from the typical disease-focused gynecology and obstetrics consultations because it focuses on:

- The emotional crisis associated with an unfulfilled wish or life goal;
- The medical treatments necessary to fulfill this wish, which typically consist of repeated cycles of interventions with a low success rate;
- The prolonged wait increases marital, familial, and interpersonal stress while also causing dissatisfaction, despair, and desperation;
- As evaluation and diagnostic procedures have an effect on couples' personal life and intimate relationships, the dynamics within the partnership are frequently impacted.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach:

The PRISMA statement principles were followed for conducting this systematic review **(Moher et al., 2009)**. Databases were searched, duplicate papers were removed with biases taken into consideration, results were then consolidated, and results were reported in accordance with PRISMA principles **(Moher et al., 2009).**

Selection Process:

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020 criteria), which offer a defined methodology or 'checklist' of the components to be reported, were utilized to improve the systematic review's transparency, clarity, and trustworthiness **(Page et al., 2021).** We created and used a clear data extraction and categorization taxonomy that specified the scope of the search, the eligibility requirements, and the data analysis framework based on the guidelines.

Eligibility Criteria:

On Scopus, GoogleScholar, and Web of Sciences, research studies published between the years 2000 and 2022 were looked up. The terms "IVF" and "psychotherapist," "therapist," "clinical psychologist," and "mental health professional" were combined as keywords in this article, along with phrases like "Mental Health in IVF Women" and "IVF Women Well-Being." The terms "IVF" and "psychotherapist," "therapist," "clinical psychologist," and "mental health professional" were combined as keywords in this review, along with phrases like "Mental Health in IVF Women" and "IVF Women Well-Being." Systematic reviews and meta-analyses, critical reviews, original research papers, reports, and book chapters were among the publications considered in this review.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Research studies examining and analyzing the role of therapists for infertile women seeking pregnancy through IVF were chosen.
- Research papers and articles featuring women seeking pregnancy, along with other studies on the mental health and general issues faced by this sample were also included.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Studies which focused on men and couples were excluded.
- Comparative studies on done on fertile and infertile females and age comparison studies were also excluded.

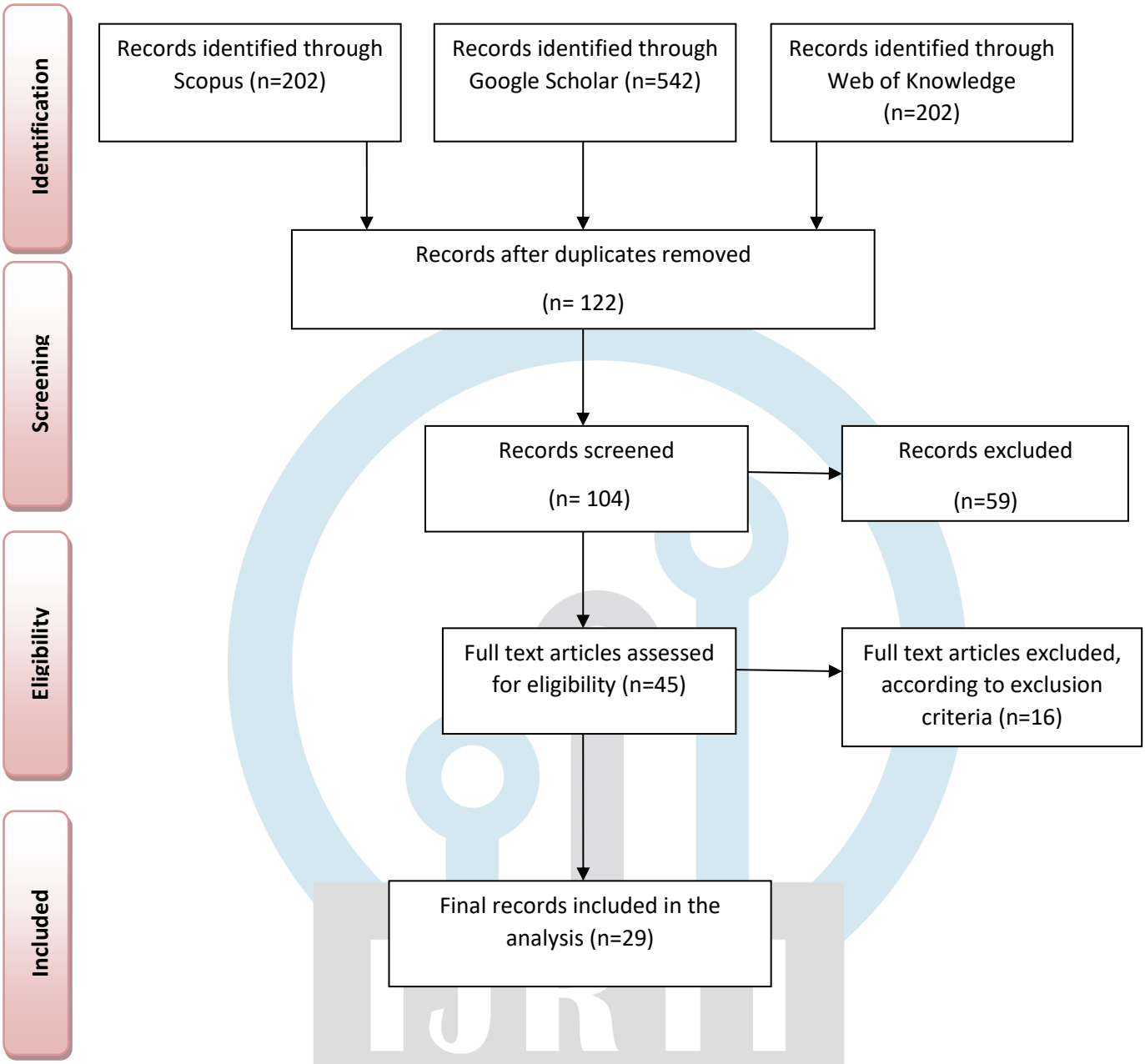

Figure 1: **PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for article selection**

Study Selection:

122 non-duplicate articles were found in the first searches. These citations' abstracts and titles were carefully examined to determine whether they adhered to the inclusion and exclusion standards. 59 publications were disqualified because they lacked original research. During the full text screening, 45 papers were reviewed in their entirety, with 16 of them being disqualified. 29 articles were consequently included in this review. The PRISMA flow chart is shown in Figure 1.

Results: This essay tries to present an overview of the studies on the subject of therapists' assistance to women undergoing IVF. We will look at a number of issues, such as emotional support, stress reduction, coping mechanisms, communication improvement, expectation management, decision-making support, sorrow and loss, general wellbeing, and potential implications on IVF results.

1. Emotional Support:

All facets of an infertile couple's quality of life (QOL) and sense of fulfillment are impacted by the stress that is specific to their infertility **(Namvar, 2018).** The provision of emotional support is one of the main responsibilities of therapists during the IVF process. The IVF process and infertility have been linked in numerous studies to emotional suffering, including anxiety and despair. For people facing these difficulties, therapists are an essential source of support and direction. The importance of longitudinal research in understanding women's long-term emotional coping with failure

IVF therapy was stressed further by **Verhaak et al. (2006).** They proposed that identifying risk variables could aid in providing targeted psychological care for women at risk of problematic emotional adjustment following unsuccessful therapy.

2. Stress Reduction:

Research has shown that counselling or therapy during IVF treatments can be instrumental in reducing stress, potentially leading to improved treatment outcomes. There are many different aspects of infertility-related stress, such as worries about the desire for parenthood **(Donkor & Sandall, 2007)**, concerns about living without children **(Bielawska-Batorowicz, 2022)**, perceived social concerns, and worries about how infertility will affect the couple's relationship **(Zurlo et al., 2020).** Studies have indicated that counselling or therapy may act as a protective factor, helping to alleviate perceived distress among couples dealing with infertility. Numerous research have looked into how relaxing can help people feel less stressed. Examples include an Indian study by **Sharma et al. (2007)** that demonstrates how relaxation can help people feel less stressed, as well as a study by **Mobini et al. (2015)** that demonstrates how relaxation can help people feel less anxious. Additionally, the study by **Valiani et al. (2014)** has demonstrated the benefit of relaxing in lowering the stress of infertile women and, consequently, the improvement in treatment outcomes.

3. Coping Strategies:

Therapists help women create appropriate coping mechanisms to handle the psychological difficulties associated with IVF. With this support, people are better able to handle the ups and downs of the therapeutic process and develop emotional resiliency. **Verhaak et al. (2006)** conducted a systematic evaluation of 25 years' worth of studies on women's emotional adaptation to IVF treatment. According to the review, women's emotional adjustment varied during the various IVF treatment phases, with common emotional symptoms including anxiety, depression, and overall unhappiness. The review also emphasized how crucial psychological assistance is for women receiving IVF. According to **Gourounti et al. (2012)**, a successful outcome depends on the patient's ability to handle the stress and difficulties that come with the ART process.

4. Communication Enhancement:

Effective communication between partners is essential during IVF. Couples who undergo therapy or counseling are more likely to communicate openly about their feelings and expectations, strengthening their relationship during this stressful time. It has been established that poor communication skills are a significant problem that contributes to couples' discontent. According to **Askari et al. (2012)**, married women who receive communication skills training may see an improvement in their spouses' quality of life and intimacy.

5. Support after negative IVF outcome:

Not all IVF cycles result in successful pregnancies. Women who try IVF and fail, face major mental health issues **(Pasch et al., 2012).** Therapists help individuals navigate grief and loss if their treatment does not lead to the desired outcome, providing essential emotional support during challenging times. Therapists play a vital role in helping women and couples manage their expectations regarding IVF outcomes. Unrealistic expectations can lead to disappointment and emotional distress. Therapists provide a realistic perspective on the IVF process and potential outcomes. The IVF journey often involves difficult decisions, such as whether to continue treatment after multiple failed attempts. Therapists provide a neutral and informed perspective to assist individuals in making these decisions. The importance of longitudinal research was stressed by **Verhaak et al. (2006)** in order to comprehend women's long-term emotional adaptation to failure IVF treatment. They proposed that identifying risk variables could aid in providing targeted psychological care for women at risk of problematic emotional adjustment following unsuccessful therapy. While achieving a healthy pregnancy is the main goal of IVF, several studies have suggested that therapy and counseling can improve IVF outcomes, perhaps by lowering stress and enhancing mental wellbeing.

6. Socio-cultural Context of Infertility:

Understanding the socio-cultural context of infertility is vital. Research emphasizes the need to consider the larger social context in which infertility is experienced, acknowledging cultural and societal influences. Overall, the research suggests that the mental health of women undergoing IVF treatment is influenced by various factors, including the socio-cultural context of infertility and the need for psychological support. While there has been advancement in our knowledge of the psychological and social elements of infertility, more study is still required to completely understand the experiences of women receiving IVF. The development of clinical treatments and interventions to improve the mental health of people trying to get pregnant through IVF can be influenced by the findings of this research. According to **Sharma, Mahajan, Saraswathy, Puri, and Babu (2022)**, infertile women are more likely than fertile women to experience poor psychological wellbeing. According to **Joshi, Singh, and Bindu's (2009)** and **Sudha and Reddy's (2010)** cross-sectional research conducted in India, infertile women suffer from low subjective well-being, high levels of psychological distress, socio-cultural stresses, and considerable coping challenges.

CONCLUSION:

In summary, therapists' play a crucial role in the IVF journey for women seeking pregnancy through IVF. In their study, **Ana et al. (2020)** found that psychological therapies reduced levels of anxiety and emotional imbalance, giving the impression of an improved quality of life. Moreover, the level of anxiety seems to have diminished more dramatically in the participants who had the psychological intervention and afterwards experienced a successful IVF. Research consistently highlights the importance of emotional support, stress reduction, coping strategies, communication enhancement, and overall well-being during IVF. Therapists assist in managing expectations, making difficult decisions, and navigating grief and loss. While the impact of therapy on IVF outcomes requires further investigation, it is evident that therapists contribute significantly to the emotional and psychological well-being of individuals undergoing fertility treatments. Additionally, understanding the socio-cultural context of infertility and providing psychological support are essential aspects of comprehensive IVF care.

This review underscores the importance of integrating therapy or counselling into the fertility journey of women seeking pregnancy through IVF, ultimately enhancing the overall IVF experience and potentially improving treatment outcomes. Further research, particularly longitudinal studies, will continue to inform and enhance the quality of care provided to individuals undergoing IVF.

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