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Condemned to be meaningful: Non-response in studies of men and infertility

Mike Lloyd

Department of Sociology and Social Policy, Victoria University of Wellington

Abstract Male infertility has been under-researched, and in part this seems due to a strong reticence by men to talk to researchers about infertility. Rather than suggest possible features of male infertility that might lead to this reticence, this paper explores how researchers have themselves accounted for the high non-response rates. The analysis details the way in which social scientific reasoning about non-response incorporates both existing knowledge about infertility and everyday reasoning about health and illness. It is suggested that this process is a variant of a pervasive form of commonsense reasoning – the documentary method of interpretation. The interesting upshot of applying this method to non-response, is that an absence of information is 'condemned to be meaningful'.

Keywords: non-response, male infertility, commonsense, accounts.

Introduction

A common research question in the sociological literature on infertility is that of gender differences in response to infertility. Do men and women within infertile couples vary in their response to infertility? In what general ways does male infertility differ from female infertility? Research on this issue has produced an apparent consensus on two points. First, it is claimed that men and women do react differently to infertility, with women finding it more of a problem than men. Greil *et al.* reviewed the literature on the issue and stated that 'These studies will not support the weight of a conclusive interpretation but, taken as a whole, they do seem to suggest that, just as his marriage is better than hers (Bernard 1972), so seemingly is his infertility better than hers' (1988:180). They illustrate this with extracts from their own interview data, and suggest that while women were often devastated by infertility, men were merely disappointed.

However, as Greil *et al.* are careful to note, this is not a 'conclusive interpretation', and the second point of apparent consensus indicates why. Somewhat less frequently, researchers have reported the comments of infertile people and others, suggesting that societal norms and values connect male fertility with male virility, sexual competency, potency, and so on. Here is an early and typical statement of this argument:

> Whilst a sense of failure may be common to both sexes, it is only the proud male who regards it [infertility] as an affront to his sexual capacity. For him procreation has always served as a means of demonstrating his virility, whereas it is well known that a woman's fertility gives no indication of her sexual responsiveness. And no matter how bravely he has accepted the discovery at a conscious level, unconsciously the equation with impotence is likely to remain.
>
> (Humphrey 1969:52)

Supposedly, it is in this linkage between fertility and virility (hereafter called the fertility-virility linkage) that infertility may have the potential to be a serious problem for men. Thus, the infertility literature presents a contrasting picture of gender's role in infertility: on one hand, men are merely disappointed by infertility, whilst on the other hand, they may find it seriously threatening due to the fertility-virility linkage.

This paper will not make any attempt to resolve this somewhat ambiguous situation. What I want to do is have a very specific look at part of the process that has constructed this ambiguity. In my view, an important factor contributing to the lack of a solid conclusion on gender effects in infertility is the fact that researchers have often experienced great difficulty in gaining male respondents in studies of infertility. While this may not be easy to overcome, the relative scarcity of male respondents also provides some interesting sociological data: researchers' own accounts of high male non-response rates. This paper uses a collection of these accounts as data, analysing them in respect to background assumptions, or more generally, commonsense. In short, it is argued that commonsense is central to researchers' accounts of the high rate of non-response by men in studies of infertility. This turns out to be highly relevant to the question of gender effects in infertility, because we see that accounts of non-response display and reinforce much of the orderly features of what researchers have said about infertility based on data gathered from those who *will* talk to researchers. The fertility-virility linkage and the supposed differential impact of infertility upon men and women are heavily present in accounts of non-response and their relationship with established knowledge about infertility. Below, the paper begins by briefly detailing my own experience of attempting to interview men about their infertility, before moving to analyse a collection of accounts of non-response.

How did the topic of non-response arise?

As part of a larger study of male infertility (Lloyd 1994) I attempted to contact infertile men to ask them if they would be interviewed for my research on male infertility. It was never the intention to gain a large sample from the population of infertile men; rather, the aim was for about thirty respondents. But even this relatively small number proved difficult to attain. Over a period of ten months and through utilising multiple sources including personal acquaintances and 'friends of friends', snowball from previous respondents, requests at two regional infertility support groups, contacts from social workers working with the infertile, and requests in a university newsletter, only nineteen interviews eventuated. Luckily I kept a detailed record of the process of attempting to gain respondents, and from this I was able to estimate a conservative non-response rate: 48 per cent. That is, for every man who agreed to talk to me, there was one man that refused. Even without referring to published research on response rates (for example: Goyder 1987) I felt that this called for some investigation, and I subsequently began looking for accounts by other researchers who had experienced a similar difficulty. It was then only a short step to begin treating accounts of non-response as data for sociological analysis. These accounts are presented below.

Data and some initial comments

The data corpus comprises eight extracts from social scientific studies of infertility which include comment on non-response:

1. Humphrey (1969:8)
This response rate, amounting to 86 per cent of the couples presumed to have been reached, was regarded as encouraging. As in all such enquiries, the non-respondents may have differed in important respects: for example, some may have been unduly sensitive about their childlessness, others lacking in a social conscience . . . Even those who could not be reached may have had more than their fair share of unresolved problems, or perhaps in some cases the marriage had been dissolved. All this is sheer speculation, but one suggestive finding emerged from the clinical summaries for these groups. This was that the sixty-eight couples whose questionnaire was returned undelivered, and the thirty-six who apparently received one but did not return it, showed rather more impairment in their fertility tests than the 216 respondents.

2. Miall (1986:271)
I began my research with the aim of comparing reactions of men and women to their involuntary childlessness. However, I was unable to obtain a sample of men sufficient for this comparative approach. Indeed, in order to recruit female respondents, I was obliged to use a snowball sampling technique. The difficulty that I had in obtaining a sample of infertile individuals who would participate in my study reflects the sensitivity and secrecy that surround the problem of infertility.

3. Miall (1989:298, fn. 3)
Male infertility may be more stigmatizing than female infertility, given the link between male potency and fertility (*c.f.* Miall, 1986). Men may have been more reluctant to discuss personal infertility. In addition, our culture continues to link women more explicitly to reproduction and family than men. Thus, men may have had less interest in participating in research on these issues.

4. Sabatelli *et al.* (1988:339, 342)
. . . data were collected from 62 women and 36 men (a 64% response rate) . . . Unfortunately, because of missing data or because of a recent birth . . . the final sample used within this study consists of 52 women and 29 men . . .

. . .

In addition, males and, in particular, males with an infertility condition, are underrepresented in the sample. This underrepresentation may be due to the unwillingness of males to participate in research on sensitive issues . . .

5. Becker and Nachtigall (1991:877)
A study of 43 American couples examined women's and men's experience of infertility treatment . . . Data were collected with 28 couples during a one-and-a-half year period in 1984–85. An additional 8 couples and 7 women who chose to be interviewed without their partner were interviewed in a second wave of data collection . . . The 7 women interviewed alone were willing to participate only if their partners were not included. They gave various reasons, such as, 'He's too busy,' 'It would add stress to the relationship,' and 'I don't want to bother him.' There were no refusals to participate in the research.

6. Woollett (1985:475)
Fifty infertile people were interviewed . . . [consisting of] Forty-two women (mean age 31.4 years, range 24–41) and eight men (mean age 36.9 years, range 29–50) . . . Women were more willing to discuss infertility than men, reflecting assumptions that children are less important to men (Owen 1982).

7. MacNab (1984:91–3)
The findings of the study are contained in microcosm in this description of the difficulties of finding men to participate in the study. The medical clinics explained that their average male infertility patient did not return for a second appointment, often avoiding even the simplest evaluation procedures. None of the men in the study are from this referral source. The urologist stated that the men whom he dealt with were usually so devastated that they could not talk about what the experience meant to them. . . . Even men who were friends of the researcher's friends and colleagues did not consistently return the questionnaires. These men had generally had direct phone contact with the researcher, and had agreed to participate in the study. Many of them did not respond to requests that they state their reasons for withdrawing from the study. Two men explained that their wives felt uncomfortable about their sharing such personal information with an outsider. One man wrote that he was too busy to fill out the questionnaire. Most others did not give reasons for changing their minds about participating. . . . What seems to make the critical difference in their willingness to join the study is the direct personal connection they feel between the referral source and themselves. . . . This is evidence that the topic is emotionally loaded. . . . The reasons for the silence that has prevailed about men and infertility are manifest in these difficulties. The need for a forum for men struggling with the problem is both evident and denied.

8. Link and Darling (1986:49, 57)
Fifty physicians were randomly selected from the membership list of the American Fertility Society and contacted to enlist their cooperation with this study. Since only six physicians agreed to participate, additional respondents were obtained . . . The difficulty in obtaining respondents resulted from the reluctance of physicians to participate in research involving their patients, as well as problems which couples experience in discussing their infertility with persons other than physicians or counsellors. The resultant sample consisted of 43 couples . . . Furthermore, the researchers were provided with data from an additional 17 wives whose husbands chose not to participate in the study.

. . .

Since the data were anonymous, the reasons why the husbands chose not to participate are unknown.

Initially, two questions can be asked about the data: why are these particular extracts offered as data? and how comparable are the extracts?

Why are these particular extracts offered as data?

Obviously, these extracts do not constitute all of the comment on non-response within the infertility literature, so the question 'why these extracts' is germane. It is not easy to find extended discussion of the researchers' problem of non-response, and a first answer to the question is that these extracts constitute some of the more extensive comment on this issue. But, more importantly, they are chosen as data because as well as containing information on non-response, they offer an explanation of it, and this is the more crucial component of interest. Further, with the exception of extract 7, all the extracts are from published studies, and are good examples of the type of research conducted on infertility. Overall, the extracts provide a good indication of the variety and patterned nature of accounting work on non-response.

How comparable are the extracts?

Broadly speaking, the data above can be conceptualised as the result of a research process involving three elements: (i) a population which, (ii) is sampled by researchers to gain information about the population, where, (iii) the sampling may be conducted in different ways. If one was concerned with the comparability of different studies of infertility, problems could arise in the definition of the population – we would want to be sure that we were talking about the same thing when comparing studies of infertility. However, such a uniform base does not always occur in the infertility literature, because there is a serious lack of clarity in the use of the term 'infertility'. While a couple may be described as 'infertile', and in this sense both the man and woman experience infertility, it is often the case that only one partner in the couple will be identified as 'reproductively impaired'. As one astute commentator has observed, 'For women, the single most common cause of infertility is . . . mating with an infertile man. (Conversely, the single most common cause of infertility in men is mating with an infertile woman.)' (Rothman 1982, as quoted in Greil *et al.* 1988:175). Obviously, infertility can also involve the situation where both the man and woman in the couple are reproductively impaired, or, where the infertility is due to unexplained factors. Lack of clarity arises because infertility researchers do not always make it clear what situation they are referring to when they use the terms 'male infertility' and/or 'female infertility'. Further, there may be insufficient information within the published study to clarify matters. This results in the situation where it is far from clear what the referents of the terms 'infertility', 'female infertility' and 'male infertility' are, hence comparability across studies is problematic.

In addition, the studies are not fully comparable because they do use different sampling methods, and it is reasonable to assume that this is related to the variation in response rates and perhaps even to the gender imbalance in respondents.

Having noted this problem of comparability, essentially it will be sidestepped in the following analysis. In practical terms, it is not possible to standardise the terms used in the extracts that form the data corpus. But more importantly, the essence of male or female infertility is not the topic of interest here. The interest is in how commonsense figures in social science accounts of non-response, and a good argument can be made that irrespective of whether the accounts lack a standard referent, commonsense will figure in the accounts as a background, unexplicated feature (*see* Cicourel 1964; Schutz 1962).

Summary of the data

Even though the number of extracts is small, the number is sufficient to see variability and overall patterns in the data corpus, as Table 1 indicates.

Table 1 *Summary of Extracts on Non-Response*

Extract	*Response Rate*	*Ratio of female respondents to male respondents*
1	86%	2.5 : 1 (80/32)[a]
2,3	not given	confined to women
4	64%	1.8 : 1 (52/29)
5	100% (92%)[b]	1.2 : 1 (43/36)
6	not given	5.3 : 1 (42/8)
7	5%[c]	confined to men
8	not given	1.4 : 1 (60/43)

a This is the sub-sample that Humphrey interviewed, the 86% response rate is for the initial sample from which those interviewed were drawn.
b Response can be calculated as 92% if one counts the 7 women who chose to be interviewed without their partner as 7 de facto cases of male non-response.
c MacNab does not give a non-response rate; this is calcuated from his outline of questionnaires sent out (N = approx. 600) and final number of respondents (N = 30).

The data's variability is clearly shown in the range of response rates: from Link and Darling's 100 per cent (or 92 per cent) (extract 5), to MacNab's 5 per cent (extract 7). While it can be ascertained from the comments of those researchers who did not give a response rate, that the non-response rate was high, the range from 5 per cent to 100 per cent is still very large. In general this would suggest that studies of infertility will not invariably face poor response rates (and obviously the differing sampling methods need to be borne in mind here). Conversely, the table also displays a clear uniformity – the gender imbalance in the samples. For every case where a ratio can be calculated, females outnumber males, with the ratios ranging from 1.2 : 1, to 5.3 : 1. Clearly, in these studies men have displayed a greater reluctance than women to participate, and not surprisingly the accounts of non-response attempt to explain this imbalance.

Accounts of non-response

Within the wide sociological literature centrally concerned with accounts (see for example: Antaki 1988, Gilbert and Abell 1983, Scott and Lyman 1968) there is some variation in definition, but Heritage's discussion of an account as an 'overt explanation in which social actors give accounts of what they are doing in terms of reasons, motives or causes' (1988:128) is a generally acceptable definition. In simple terms, an account is not just a description of an event but is an explanation of *how* or *why* it happened. Such explanatory work may take many forms, from explicit delineation of causal linkages, to taken-for-granted inferences about motives for action.

Clearly the data corpus represents social scientific accounting work on the problem of non-response. In essence, the account consists of an explanation of non-response, where this involves attributions of reasons, causes and motives. This attribution work is a prime area where important linkages between social science and commonsense occur, and this will be discussed in more detail after the three main types of account are described, as follows.

1. Sensitivity

This appears to be the dominant account in the extracts. Very simply the explanation is that non-response is an indication of the sensitivity of infertility – it is a delicate matter and hence people may not wish to talk to a researcher (or others) about it. Forms of this account can be seen in extracts 1, 2, 4, and 7, where, respectively, the following phrases are linked to infertility as the underlying reason for non-response: 'sensitivity', 'sensitivity and secrecy', 'sensitive issues' and 'emotionally loaded'. The simplest invocation of a sensitivity account is seen in extract 4, where Sabatelli, Meth and Gavazzi state, 'This underrepresentation [of males] may be due to the unwillingness of males to participate in research on sensitive issues.'

In its general form, 'sensitivity' may be used to account for non-response by both men and women. For example, Miall (extract 2) wanted to interview both men and women but clearly had a problem with male non-response, which she explains via a sensitivity account (extract 3); but, in addition, she suggests that the fact that she had to resort to snowball sampling shows that gaining female respondents was also a problem (extract 2). Thus, Miall offers the 'sensitivity and secrecy' of infertility as an account of non-response for both genders. Although not so explicitly, Link and Darling (extract 8) suggest that their problem in gaining a sample of infertile couples, as well as being due to the reluctance of physicians to cooperate, was due to 'problems which couples experience in discussing their infertility'. This seems to fit within a sensitivity account, and again is applicable to both men and women.

In addition, there is a more specific form of the sensitivity account specifically offered for male non-response. This is the fertility-virility linkage, which might be considered as a subset of the sensitivity account applying specifically to men. The clearest statement of it comes from Miall: 'Male infertility may be more stigmatising than female infertility, given the link between male potency and fertility (*c.f.* Miall, 1986). Men may have been more reluctant to discuss personal infertility . . .' (extract 3). While there are no other clear examples of the fertility-virility linkage account in the extracts, researchers often make comments about the fertility-virility linkage in discussion not concerned with non-response. For example, MacNab, identifies the links between masculinity and fertility as an important part of the experience of male infertility, but, he does not take this up as an explicit account of the real difficulty he had in gaining respondents.

2. Children are not so important for men

As outlined in the introduction, consideration of the question of gender differences in response to infertility has produced a consensus that women are more adversely affected by infertility than men. A very common explanation for this focuses on socialisation into normative roles. It is argued that in our culture the socialisation process places high value on women as mothers, hence this becomes a natural and normal role for women. A correlate of this explanation is that the role of father and the work of childrearing is not so important for men (see: Berg *et al.* 1991, Humphrey 1977, Nock 1987). This correlate then becomes available for accounting work on non-response. Extracts 3 and 6 are two clear examples of this account: 'In addition, our culture continues to link women more explicitly to reproduction and family than men. Thus, men may have had less interest in participating in research on these issues' (3); 'Women were more willing to discuss infertility than men, reflecting assumptions that children are less important to men (Owen 1982)' (6). While not as common as the sensitivity account, this account is offered, and has attractive linkages to other research on gender roles and childrearing.

3. Pragmatic and other factors

There are three extracts (1, 5, 7) which include this type of account. In two out of the three examples, the account is made via straight quotes from, or reports of, the subjects' discourse, rather than as researchers' direct explanations: 'They gave various reasons, such as, 'He's too busy,' 'It would add stress to the relationship,' and 'I don't want to bother him.' (5); 'Two men explained that their wives felt uncomfortable about their sharing such personal information with an outsider. One man wrote that he was too busy to fill out the questionnaire' (7). While some of these reports contain matters that suggest links with a sensitivity account, there is a common emphasis on pragmatism over and above the possibility of sensitivity: being too busy; respecting their partner's wishes; not wanting to add stress to a relationship.

One account that clearly belongs in an 'other' category is contained in extract 1. Humphrey makes the interesting comment that, 'As in all such enquiries, the non-respondents may have differed in important respects: for example, some may have been unduly sensitive about their childlessness, others lacking in a social conscience' (extract 1). While Humphrey offers the dominant sensitivity account, he also makes the suggestion that non-respondents were 'lacking in a social conscience'. This is the sole occurrence of such an account, and given contemporary discussions of 'informed consent' and researcher-subject relations it seems to be based on very outdated assumptions.

These then, are the three main accounts which can be identified in the data corpus. Each extract may contain two or more of the accounts, and there appears to be no sense in which they are mutually incompatible. Clearly, the 'sensitivity' account is the most common, with the other two being offered as additional explanations.

A central task in accounts of non-response: the attribution of motives

In the accounts of non-response the issue to be explained is precisely why the candidates did not wish to partake in the researchers' studies. Thus, part of the work that the accounts accomplish can be labelled 'attribution of motives'. The question pursued in this section is based upon the assumption that the attributions of motive contained in the accounts are perfectly plausible – they do not seem strained but are reasonable explanations. But of course, the question is, how is this plausibility accomplished, how is the naturalness of the accounts produced? In the extracts the attributions of motive are made, mostly, as blunt assertions – they appear to be so obvious as not to need explaining. But given the emphasis within social science on reasoned argument and the provision of evidence for generalisation, it would be surprising if blunt assertions were all that were offered. Indeed, five forms of motive attribution work can be identified in the accounts.

1. 'No comment, but . . .'

In many research situations there is little possibility of non-respondents giving any information on their motives for non-response. Hence, one possible solution to the question of motives is to accept this lack of information and avoid comment altogether. Extract 8 appears to be an example of this. Link and Darling's initial sample of 43 couples was supplemented by '17 wives whose husbands chose not to participate in the study'. While Link and Darling used the wives' responses as data, they restricted comment on the husbands' non-response to the sole statement that 'Since the data were anonymous, the reasons why the husbands chose not to participate are unknown'. In effect, they make no comment. While this seems to be a case of adherence to a relatively strict scientific model, where if there is no evidence there is no comment offered, it should be noted that Link and Darling previously invoked the sensitivity account in relation to their problem in gaining couple respondents. In my view, a consequence of this is that this is not an absolute case of 'no comment'. The avoidance of comment does leave the motive attribution work up to the reader, but Link and Darling's previous invocation of a 'sensitivity account' seems to provide a minimal frame for understanding the subsequent mention of the husbands' non-response: given 'sensitivity' we all know how to interpret the husbands' non-response.

2. 'The candidates said . . .'

In some research situations non-respondents (and others who speak for them) do provide at least minimal information on why they did not respond. In this situation, a relatively simple option for providing the grounds of motive attribution is simple reportage of what information non-respondents offer. Extracts 5 and 7 include examples of this:

> Two men explained that their wives felt uncomfortable about their sharing such personal information with an outsider. One man wrote that he was too busy to fill out the questionnaire. (7)

> They gave various reasons, such as, 'He's too busy, 'It would add stress to the relationship,' and 'I don't want to bother him.' (5)

The extracts differ in that Becker and Nachtigall (5) directly quote three reasons for non-response by husbands, while MacNab (7) does not opt for direct quotation. But, both show the general technique of reporting what the candidates said.

Some research from conversation analysis suggests an interesting point about the use of such a technique. Pomerantz's (1984) research on the practice in conversation of telling 'how I know' seems particularly germane. She discusses excuse making, and argues that in the situation where someone repeats an excuse they must take some position with respect to the validity of the excuse. Simple repetition of the excuse takes the position that the excuse is valid and accurate, whereas reportage of only the circumstances of hearing the excuse does not imply acceptance of the excuse, but displays scepticism and caution about the acceptability of the excuse. Now, in the use of 'the candidates said . . .' technique, simple repetition of motives for non-response appears. While giving a motive for non-response is not exactly the same as giving an excuse, it is similar; yet, my feeling is that the simple repetition does not accomplish what it does in ordinary conversation. That is, the overall tone of the extracts which use 'the candidates said . . .' technique is one of scepticism and caution, and not acceptance of the proffered motive. Reporting that a candidate said 'he was too busy to fill out the questionnaire' invites scepticism, in short, it seems like a convenient lie.

This inversion of an everyday technique and what it accomplishes, seems explicable by reference to the operation of an underlying assumption. This point will be taken up more extensively in the conclusion, but simply, the suggestion is that the inversion occurs because prior to the offers of what the candidates said, there has been massive adherence to the notion that infertility is a sensitive matter. First to discuss the sensitivity of infertility, and then to offer 'being too busy' as an 'excuse' for non-response, inverts the effect of simple repetition as a warrant for excuse-acceptance. Obviously, this is speculative, but I get a strong feeling when reading the pragmatic accounts that the reasons for non-response are to be treated with caution. If correct, this represents an interesting intertwining of commonsense and social science.

3. 'Other evidence suggests . . .'

The clearest example here is in the extract (1) from Humphrey's work. Because his initial sample was gained through an infertility clinic, Humphrey was able to compare non-respondents' and respondents' medical records. Thus, while his initial comments on the reasons for non-response are, as admitted, 'sheer speculation', access to the medical records enables the addition of a more 'objective' scientific procedure – the use of cross validating information – into his accounting and motive attribution work. The result is, as he puts it, the 'suggestive finding' that non-respondents' showed rather more impairment in their fertility tests than the 216 respondents'. He does not discuss this any further (except in a footnote which states that the difference was not statistically significant), but it is notable that he is clearly leaving the presumed linkage between greater impairment and non-response unstated and implicit. The sense of his argument is dependent upon readers' abilities to fill in the missing clause to make the complete statement that, the worse the fertility impairment, the greater the social sensitivity, and hence a greater likelihood of non-response. While alternative readings of Humphrey's linkage are possible[1], my feeling is that this one may be dominant because it relates to a very simple point of everyday thinking about illness and disease: the worse the degree of one's illness or impairment, the greater sensitivity one should feel about it. In this case then, the common scientific procedure of using cross validating evidence has commonsense assumptions about reactions to illness heavily embedded within it.

4. 'Research shows . . .'

There are two examples of reference to previous research in the extracts. Miall (extract 3) uses a citation to her own work:

> Male infertility may be more stigmatising than female infertility, given the link between male potency and fertility (*c.f.* Miall, 1986). Men may have been more reluctant to discuss personal infertility.

and Woollett (extract 6) refers to other research:

> Women were more willing to discuss infertility than men, reflecting assumptions that children are less important to men (Owen 1982).

Clearly, references function as a persuasive device, suggesting that there is evidence to bolster the claims being made (Gilbert 1977; Latour and Bastide 1986). In the first case it is the fertility-virility linkage version of the 'sensitivity' account that is strengthened by the reference, while in the second it is the 'children are not so important for men' account that is strengthened. But equally as clearly, there is a great deal of glossing occurring here: a whole research paper is summarised as positive evidence for the substance of the accounts. Obviously, academic readers who are familiar with the literature being cited can make up their own minds about whether the citation displays the knowledge as glossed; and, of course, given that academics do engage in critique of other academic work, disagreement is always a possibility. But, the interesting point here is that one cannot doubt everything all of the time – the simplest option when reading social science discourse is to accept that references to other research do indeed provide evidence to fit the argument. Just as in everyday life where people accept what other people say most of the time, the very mundaneness of referencing contributes to its effectiveness as a persuasive device, and more generally contributes to the continual re-establishment of consensus in particular research areas.

Moreover, in this process there is the potential for weak research findings to become reified as strong and accurate findings. This possibility can be seen in Miall's referencing work. She cites her own work in relation to the fertility-virility linkage, but this work actually contains no direct comment from men on this issue – it is based upon comments from their partners. I am not suggesting that evidence on the fertility-virility linkage must come from men, rather, it is being emphasised that interview talk between a researcher and a female partner about how the male partner experienced infertility will inevitably display and utilise cultural forms which shape what is said (see Gubrium and Holstein 1987;

Perakyla and Silverman 1991). In the 1986 research that Miall cites, the question of the socially organised manner in which women might speak for their male partners is not considered: there is an assumption that asking about another's experience as an interaction itself, is unrelated to the content of what is being reported, that is, their partner's experience of infertility. Despite these problems it is clear that the aim of citation is to give her accounting work greater persuasive force.

5. 'Everyone knows . . .'

While the above devices are used sporadically in the extracts, a great deal of the motive-attribution work contained in the accounts is achieved by simple declarative statements of the form, A is well known about infertility, and this clearly explains B (non-response). Consider Miall's statement that

> The difficulty that I had in obtaining a sample of infertile individuals who would participate in my study reflects the sensitivity and secrecy that surround the problem of infertility. (2)

This displays a simple declarative linkage between infertility and sensitivity, which constitutes the explanation for non-response. The linkage between infertility and sensitivity is offered here as something that 'Everyone knows' – no references are supplied, no quotations offered, it is simply assumed that the facts of the matter are now well established (extracts 1, 4, 7, and 8 also contain similar examples). Also, there is a second order of invocation of what 'Everyone knows' occurring here. Miall does not need to say exactly how the sensitivity and secrecy of infertility led to her problems with non-response: it is just assumed that we know and can fill in the other logical clause – people with sensitive conditions will often avoid talking about them. That is, the attributed motive for non-response is simply one of 'pain avoidance' – people will avoid talking about things that have pained them.

Hence, Miall is relying on the fact that in everyday life 'persons' actions are all too readily explicable' (Sharrock and Button 1991:165), that is, she is utilising a commonly available mode of understanding human action (following Mills' (1940) early work we could also refer to this as a 'vocabulary of motive'). Infertility researchers seem to have no trouble finding infertility as a 'problem', as a 'sensitive' matter, and inferring motives for non-response from this underlying typification of sensitivity. As Watson notes, 'Motives are so inextricably built into the description of deeds that the imputed motive makes the deed publicly visible for what it is' (1983:42). Moreover, there are strong connections between imputation of motive and society as a moral order:

> The imputation of motive(s) is part and parcel of the many ways in which society members . . . articulate and apply the logic of the moral

order. To impute motives is one way in which we not only make sense, but *moral* sense of conduct. (Watson 1983: 43, original emphasis)

That is, feeling pained about infertility and being reticent to talk about it, as a justifiable and *right* way to feel. Hence, the prevalence of 'Everyone knows' forms of motive attribution in the accounts of non-response: these explanations are able to be left at a taken-for-granted level because they are morally sanctionable descriptions. In effect, to doubt the efficacy of such a motive attribution would be to risk negative moral implications. Despite social science operating with a notion of scepticism, it is heavily dependent on motive attributions that have a taken-for-granted, and hence, moral force.

Discussion

There is, of course, nothing new in saying that commonsense is necessarily a part of social scientific reasoning. Schutz's (1962) early arguments on this issue are well known, and have been taken up, elaborated and researched most clearly within ethnomethodology (for example: Garfinkel 1967; Heritage 1984; Pollner 1987). Despite this familiarity, there may well be a strong 'so what' reaction from many readers to this paper. This reaction may stem, for example, from the fact that nowhere have I directly addressed the questions of whether, when, in what ways, or for whom, male infertility 'really' is a problem. Or on a different note, the question may be asked, 'why spend so much time on interpreting non-response, when there is perfectly good data available from men who will talk about infertility?' Below, it is worth briefly addressing the potential 'so what' reaction, before elaborating one further aspect which also provides a rationale for the approach taken in this paper.

Clearly, in terms of the form/content binary, my analysis is more form than content oriented, however, there are now good grounds for arguing that, within the sociology of health and illness, an emphasis on form does not mean we have to give up a substantive concern with health or illness. A cogent argument on this score comes from David Silverman (1989) who in formulating six rules of qualitative research includes the following rule: 'Understand the cultural forms through which 'truths' are accomplished'. That is, if we admit that there is no direct route to the content/substance of health and illness (or any other social matter), then it is crucial to analyse the 'cultural forms' which make available, give shape and sense to the particular substantive health and illness matters we study.

My argument above is consistent with this position and simply applies it to an aspect of social scientific work: asking people about their experiences is a particular cultural form where its varying products (response/non-response) are interpretable in ways heavily dependent upon commonsense and connected moral implications. An important point to note about this stance is that I am not saying that the sensitivity of infertility is not 'really' experienced. Amongst the infertile men that I talked to were many who clearly did find aspects of the infertility experience troubling and sensitive. But following Silverman's rule, the point is to avoid treating this as an 'inner' or 'private' experience: it occurs in particular contexts, it is made real through particular cultural forms. Another way to put this is to say that the reality of the infertility experience occurs within networks (to borrow a phrase from Latour (1993)). From a Latourian perspective the objects which scientists study are simultaneously real and socially constructed: scientists' measuring instruments do measure reality, but Nature then becomes a reality in a network – of scientific practices. Similarly, it can be said that the sensitivity of male infertility is real, but only within specific social networks and procedures that probe into the experience of infertility. Change the connections amongst the elements of the network and you will change the social object that is being constituted. This point is important for it suggests that the elements of infertility that social scientists choose to put together are crucial in determining the final shape of our understandings of infertility. An elaboration of this point concludes this paper below.

The seamless web

A point that has not been highlighted above, but should nonetheless be apparent, is the way that both the actions of those who do, and do not, respond, are incorporated in a mutually consistent and reinforcing manner in the broader explanation of infertility. For example, in the 'children are not so important for men' account, previous theoretical and empirical examinations of fertility and infertility were used to explain non-response, and in turn, albeit implicitly, accounts of the high rate of male non-response reinforce these theoretical and empirical examinations. Heritage's discussion of a 'seamless web' is usefully applied to such instances and below I will briefly describe his argument before applying it to non-response in studies of men and infertility.

Heritage uses the phrase 'seamless web' in a discussion of' 'accounts and the structure of social action' (1988:138–41, *also see* Heritage 1984:106–10). His concern is with the centrality of accounts in the reproduction of social order, and he starts by emphasising a basic point of ethnomethodology's 'procedural turn': shared procedures are both the means whereby actions are produced, and understood. Maintain these procedures (or methods) and both the social organisation of action, and the social intelligibility of action, are maintained. As an example, Heritage considers the simple rule that after a question a second speaker should produce an answer. Consistent with the above, this is both a rule of conduct and a rule of interpretation – the rule provides guidelines for temporal sequencing, and for how the action and its respective parts are to be interpreted. But, like all rules, it is not always complied with; this could be seen as an erosion of the rule's power, but this does not happen because an accounting machinery with important socially integrative functions comes into play.

Simply, the absence of an answer to a question brings with it two major types of interpretive option. First, it could be reasoned that the rule that questions should be answered no longer applies to the current situation, and that some other yet to be determined rule applies. This option very rarely happens. Instead, secondly, we cling to the presupposition that questions should be answered, and therefore the result is that the absence of an answer requires explanation – an account is formed. In a logical sense, any number of accounts could be thought of, but the task is to find one that fits the circumstances, to offer the 'natural' account for the situation. In addition, accounts often have negative implications for the non-answerer, hence adding to the rule's power.

The crucial point to be taken from this relatively simple example is that the second interpretive option does not weaken the rule, but in fact embodies the presupposition that questions relevance answers. That is, as Heritage puts it, the 'exception proves the rule':

> For speakers there are only two options: either the rule linking questions and answers is complied with and the question is answered, or the lack of an answer is an exception to the rule which requires some kind of 'secondarily elaborative' explanation. . . . The exceptions with their explanations thus become 'the exceptions that prove the rule' because the provision of such explanations maintains the rule's presuppositional status both as a rule of conduct and as a rule of interpretation. Once again, we encounter a closed circle of interpretation. Presuppositional rules of action and interpretation interlock with the organization of account giving to form a seamless web – a self-motivating, self-sustaining and self-reproducing normative organization of action. (1988:140)

In this way, ordinary everyday accounts of even the most mundane matters (*e.g.* failure to return a greeting; failure to answer a question) make a crucial contribution to the maintenance of social order.

In many ways the 'seamless web' can be seen as a restatement of the 'documentary method of interpretation' (Garfinkel, 1967), and it is mainly in this sense that implications will be drawn from it, as follows. At risk of overgeneralisation, it can be argued that the social science literature on infertility has framed infertility as both a social and individual problem. So often academic work on infertility begins by stating that it is a major life crisis for individuals. The predominance of psychological studies of infertility has a great deal to do with the promulgation of this view, as psychologists have considered both, possible psychogenic causes of infertility, and the impact of infertility on psychological function (for reviews see: Edelmann and Connolly 1986, Unruh and McGrath 1985). But, equally, social scientists have studied infertility as a 'social problem', as the following list of research topics indicates: the 'social construction' of infertility as a matter of 'desperation', 'disease' or 'social concern' (Gerson 1989, Becker and Nachtigall 1992, Scritchfield 1989); stigmatisation, self-labelling, infertile identity, and coping strategies (Miall 1986, 1989, Olshansky 1987, Sandelowski 1986, 1987, Woollett 1985); the impact of infertility on marital and sexual relations (Greil *et al.* 1989); problematic aspects of doctor-patient relations within infertility treatment (Becker and Nachtigall 1991, Meerabeau 1991); provision of health services for the infertile (Henshaw and Orr 1987, Pfeffer and Quick 1988); the epidemiology of infertility (Aral and Cates 1983, Belsey and Ware 1986); and of course the very large literature on the 'medicalisation' of infertility and negative impacts of reproductive technologies on women.

As noted above, this approach to infertility establishes the underlying pattern that infertility is a problem. It is not being argued here that this notion is a fabrication, a fallacy, a myth, and so on; it is simply being emphasised that this general typification of infertility as a problem can be treated as an underlying pattern which informs the practical work of researching infertility in various ways. Accounting for non-response is the case in point: it has been accounted for in a way which strongly reinforces the view of infertility as a problem. This is despite the fact that non-response is literally an absence of information, and, as such, there are an indefinite number of ways that it can be explained. For example, a perfectly plausible account of non-response is that the family pet died just prior to the request for an interview, hence the candidate did not wish to respond. It would be straining things to apply this as an overall account of non-response, nonetheless, it is logically plausible as a pragmatic account. But, the point is, we do not imbue this account with moral force precisely because it does not fit the circumstances in which the accounting work is being done, that is, the predominance of the view that infertility is a problem. Very clearly, the 'documentary method of interpretation' is applicable here: the underlying pattern (infertility is a problem) provides the basis for finding and interpreting individual evidences (the phenomenon of high male non-response), and in turn the underlying pattern is derived and reconstituted from the individual evidences.

The interesting thing here is that using the same principle the following is equally possible. Take the case where researchers work with, or to, the assumption that male infertility is not a problem for men – call this assumption one.[2] Presuming that these researchers set out to talk to infertile men, then we have the simple outcome of 'yes' or 'no' to requests for interviews. Response and non-response rates can then be calculated and made available for accounting work. Now, a good response rate, in itself, can be taken as confirmation of assumption one: infertile men do not find infertility a problem and concomitantly have no qualms in talking to researchers about their experience of infertility. That is, the assumption is being complied with. In the case of non-response, under assumption one it is perfectly plausible to offer the account that infertile men did not respond because the matter was so mundane and uninteresting to them that they could see little point in responding to a researcher. In Heritage's terms this would equate to the exception (non-response) proving the assumption, hence, response and accounts of non-response would form a 'seamless web' turning on assumption one.

Obviously, however, this form of explanation is absent in the data corpus – it does not even appear to have been entertained. Instead, response and accounts of non-response are quite clearly derived from, and constitutive of, a different assumption: male infertility is a sensitive matter. In short, it is a problem – call this assumption two. Here, response can be interpreted as compliance with assumption two by arguing, for example, that infertile males will talk to researchers because it has a cathartic effect – they are glad to 'get it off their chest'. MacNab's statement that 'The need for a forum for men struggling with the problem is both evident and denied' (extract 7) seems related to such an argument. Equally, non-response is accounted for in a way that is consistent with the underlying assumption. Despite there being any number of plausible explanations for why men would not want to talk to a researcher about their infertility, a sensitivity account is the most dominant and 'intuitively plausible.'

In this way, both response and non-response are incorporated into a 'seamless web': infertility is reconstituted as a problem, as a sensitive issue. People who are approached by researchers wishing to hear about their experience of infertility, irrespective of whether they agree or disagree to be interviewed, thus

> find themselves in a world of practical actions having the property that whatever they do will be intelligible and accountable as a sustaining of, or a development or violation, etc. of, some order of activity. . . . [T]he actors' actions, to adapt Merleau-Ponty's phrase, are condemned to be meaningful. (Heritage 1984:110, original emphasis)

Infertility researchers work within the world of academic knowledge, which strongly guides them to study infertility as an individual or social problem. This underlying pattern is then brought into play in both, accounts of respondents' experiences of infertility, and in accounts of the motives of non-respondents. Thus, non-respondents' actions become an exception that proves the underlying assumption that infertility is a problem. The simple act of non-response is 'condemned to be meaningful' as social scientists reconstitute infertility as a problem. Note though that social scientists are not the only ones responsible for this outcome: I hope to have shown above that commonsense is deeply embedded in the whole process of researching infertility. The upshot of my argument is, however, that if we now understand a little more about how the 'truth' of infertility is accomplished, we may be able to see it differently.

Address for correspondence: Mike Lloyd, Department of Sociology and Social Policy, Victoria University of Wellington, P.O. Box 600, Wellington New Zealand.

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Notes

1 For example, an anonymous reviewer provided the following plausible reading: the greater the impairment, the poorer the treatment prognosis and hence less willingness to participate in research associated with the treatment facility.
2 The following discussion is stimulated by Heritage's argument about the 'seamless web', but note that it is a speculative use of Heritage's argument. For one, I am referring to 'assumptions' and not 'rules', although the two are similar. More generally, social science accounts of infertility and non-response are much more complex than the relatively simple rule that after a question a second speaker should produce an answer. Nevertheless, my argument seems consistent with the general principle of Heritage's discussion.

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