

Identity Focus: Women dealing with miscarriages

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1. According to Claude M. Steele, author of *Whistling Vivaldi*, “identity contingencies” are “the things you have to deal with in a situation because you have a given social identity, because you are old, young, gay, a white male, a woman, black, Latino, politically conservative or liberal, diagnosed with bipolar disorder, a cancer patient, and so on. Generally speaking, contingencies are circumstances you have to deal with in order to get what you want or need in a situation.” Can you describe for me how your social identity has been a source of conflict in this way? If so, tell the story of a particular situation you had to navigate to get what you wanted or needed.
  - a. I’ve struggled with infertility for three years. I’ve had to deal with how to get the help and support I need in a society that often mistreats women, in particular, women who have a career or have chosen or had to have children later in life. Other countries and states offer financial support for IVF (in vitro fertilization), but California is not one of them. Trying to become a mother has become just as expensive as putting a down payment on a house. I’ve had to learn how to deal with this conflict and the conflict of getting proper care. Our first round of IVF did not work, and I had to decide if I wanted to stay with the doctor— a doctor who had repeatedly mishandled my case. It was a hard decision, but I decided to change doctors. It went against everything I’ve been taught— trust experts and don’t make a fuss. Now, I’ve become a bit of an expert myself, and I have no problem making a fuss when I need to. Women are taught to be subservient. As an infertile woman, if I want a biological child, I do not have the choice of being passive.
2. What words, definitions, or ideas do you associate with the word “citizen”? How do these associations line up with your experience as a white woman struggling with infertility?
  - a. A citizen is a member of a society, who in return for governmental protections, gives up certain rights. Dealing with infertility has been very frustrating as a citizen. California almost passed a bill this year that would have required insurance to cover infertility treatments. But guess what? The bill got changed and now I won’t be covered. Trust me, infertility has made me a more active and impassioned citizen. I’ve written my representatives and called them. I’ve asked others to call them as well. I genuinely believe fertility is a human issue. It impacts not just the couple but the entire society.
3. Can you tell me a story about a time you felt pre-judged or discriminated against for being a woman struggling with infertility? Have **there** been any other experiences like that that you’ve experienced or witnessed?
  - a. I’ve actually experienced a lot of judgment for what I’m doing and a big part of me gets it. The world is overpopulated, so why don’t I just adopt? And my head says that is the right choice, but biologically, I want to be pregnant and have a child who looks like my family and my husband. The worst part is going to baby showers for friends. Everyone looks at you with pity. Every single friend I have

who has started trying for a baby is either pregnant or has children, in one case a friend has had two children since I started trying. A lot of them have pulled away from me or struggled to talk with me about infertility. I've always wanted to be a mom, but I can't seem to join the club. Financially, I feel taken advantage of. It's like a magic bean scenario. How much would you pay for the chance of magic working? And the answer is a lot. But is it fair that because of some trick of biology, I have to pay a fortune? One in eight couples has fertility issues, yet there is minimal if no coverage for treatments. Other medications and treatments are covered, so why not this? I feel like it's really an issue of sexism. Our country punishes women in every way it can.

4. What kinds of images and stories in the media about infertility concern you the most or cause you to react emotionally? Why?
  - a. Ugh! Motherhood is such a cult. I heard that once and it made me laugh. But any birth announcement is triggering for me. I feel jealousy and then feel bad about being jealous. "Happy for you, sad for me" is the saying all us infertile women use. Some celebrities do talk about struggling. Like Michelle Obama just included a whole chapter in her book about IVF and the process of it. But mostly I hate the pictures of women with a litter of kids, and joking about how they can drink out of the same cup as their husbands and get pregnant. It's smug! It's cocky. Like being proud of being tall or naturally blonde. Like you one the genetic lottery, congratulations! I hope you trip on your perfect shoes and uterus.
5. Do you know of any public figures who have worked for or against the advancement of infertility? (If so, who? And, how do you feel about their work?)
  - a. Like I mentioned before Michelle Obama did IVF and Nicole Kidman did IVF and Chrissy Teigen did IVF. But there's still a stigma about fertility. It's a very sensitive and private topic, but we live in a public space. There's judgment of women who are infertile. A feeling of you're not good enough to have a child. Or you're fighting against fate.
6. Zora Neale Hurston once wrote, "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background." Does this statement feel true to your own experience in some way? Can you rephrase this statement to express your own experience more accurately?
  - a. I feel most infertile when the birth announcement of friends and strangers make me want to cry.
7. Has your outward appearance ever caused you to feel invisible, hyper-visible, or both?
  - a. I've been open about my struggle, and you gain a lot of weight with treatments, so it feels like everyone is staring at my belly. Pregnancy watch 2019. I feel both invisible and hyper-visible.
8. Has your self-image or your perception of your own body ever been challenged or changed by how others see or relate to you for struggling with infertility?
  - a. I used to hate my body and now I see us as being on the same team so to speak. I still get frustrated. But, in the end, I'm more than a vessel or a space for something else to grow. It's sounds corny, but I've learned to mother myself and take care of my body in a way that I never have before.

9. In the book *Citizen*, author Claudia Rankine uses many narratives of “micro-aggressions,” or individual acts of racism that collectively form the crushing experience of racism in America. Have you ever experienced or witnessed microaggressions directed at infertility? Can you describe one or two specific instances? How have these microaggressions affected you or someone you know over time?
- a. People love to say, “Oh, have you tried relaxing?” “Have you tried this diet?” “I have a friend who stopped trying and then they had twins.” All of these statements imply that I am doing something wrong. We hate to think that we have limited control over our lives, but guess what? We do. People don’t like to believe in bad luck, but guess what, it happens. Crappy things happen and bodies sometimes don’t do what they’re supposed to do.
10. In which specific areas of American life/culture do you feel the most included or represented? In which areas do you feel the least included or represented? Why?
- a. I love Instagram and how women are sharing their journeys. Actually, I hate that word “journey,” but it sounds better than “Hell Parade.”
11. In *Citizen*, Claudia Rankine uses many different visual images that serve as metaphors for the experience of being Black in America. What do you think could be a metaphor for your experience?
- a. My first doctor’s office had a picture of an empty nest in their waiting room and I thought that was crap. How dare they? Right. Way to state the obvious. I prefer a wait at a bus stop where everyone else has their bus and fewer and fewer people are on the bench. So maybe I have to call an Uber or Lyft. Hopefully, we all end up where we want to be.