



THE PSYCHOSOCIAL BURDEN OF CHLAMYDIAL INFECTION: RESULTS OF FORMATIVE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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Background and Objectives

Although *Chlamydia trachomatis* is the most commonly reported infectious disease in the United States, few studies have evaluated the psychological and social impact of being diagnosed with chlamydial infection. We undertook formative qualitative research to assess the psychosocial domains of concern among women who were undergoing chlamydia testing or who had recently been diagnosed with chlamydia in family planning clinics in a Midwestern US city.

Methods

Women age 16 years or older attending three family planning clinics in St. Louis, Missouri were recruited to participate in focus groups and in-depth qualitative interviews regarding the psychological and social effects of chlamydial infection. Subjects were eligible if they had recently been tested for endocervical infection and results were still unknown (UNK), or if they had a positive endocervical chlamydia test in the previous month (POS). Focus groups and interviews addressed the ways in which a chlamydia diagnosis might affect psychological and social well-being, or might otherwise affect interpersonal relationships. All interactions were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed for thematic content (The Ethnograph v5.0) to identify primary domains of psychosocial concern about chlamydia.

Table 1
Respondent Characteristics

	N
Infection Status	
Chlamydia-positive (POS)	18
Chlamydia-unknown (UNK)	16
Participation type	
In-depth interview	24
Focus group	10
Race/ethnicity	
African-American	25
Caucasian	9
Age - mean (s.d.)	20.7 (4.0)

Table 2
Domains of Concern about Chlamydial Infection

Domain	Example
stigma and shame	feeling embarrassed or guilty about chlamydia
personal responsibility	blaming oneself for getting chlamydia
self-esteem and self-worth	thinking less of oneself for getting chlamydia
partner fidelity / trust	anger or concern that partner was unfaithful
future reproductive health	ability to have children affected by chlamydia
future sexual relationships	future partners may give chlamydia again

Results

A total of 34 women (16 UNK, 18 POS) participated in four focus groups and 24 in-depth extended interviews (Table 1). The mean age of respondents was 20.7 ± 4.0 years; 74% of participants were African American.

Six primary domains of psychosocial concern about chlamydia were identified by respondents (Table 2): (1) stigma and shame of having an STD; (2) perception of personal responsibility for sexual health; (3) impact on self-esteem and self-worth; (4) partner fidelity and trust within the relationship; (5) impact on future reproductive health and medical consequences; and (6) impact on future sexual relationships.

Representative informant responses are reported verbatim in Table 3. Many subjects noted that a chlamydia diagnosis would have a positive impact on future healthcare seeking behavior. Younger patients were generally less knowledgeable about chlamydia, while older patients expressed greater degrees of concern about their ability to establish meaningful interpersonal relationships in the future. There were no overt differences among respondents with regard to infection status or demographic characteristics.

Table 3
Representative Informant Responses about Chlamydia

Stigma / shame

At first I didn't even think of myself as a person. I just thought, like, I have chlamydia, God you are so disgusting... I felt disappointed in myself. It was just like a heavy stone placed upon me.
-Angelica

Responsibility

Personal behavior for me [is important], one person at a time. And being more stringent about getting check-ups every three months because ... even if you trust them, you can never give somebody 100% trust, so you just need to be very strict about getting tested.
-Bronwen

Self-esteem / self-worth

The person who was having sex for the first time, I think it would take a long time for them, you know, to get over it....she would probably be hurt and it would lower her self esteem. She would feel like she had failed herself.
-Latasha

Partner fidelity / trust

I really had to end all ties with [my boyfriend] because it makes you think that giving me chlamydia once, can you give it to me again? It's like a sense of dishonesty and trust. Everything that a relationship is built on.
-Angelica

Reproductive health

Will I be able to have kids? Before I got tested, I was like, what if I do have anything, will it affect ... and after I found out I did have it, I was like worried about ...can I have kids? It played before and it played after.
-Megann

Future relationships

I'm not gonna broadcast like, ya, I have chlamydia... but I tell guys that I meet, you know, like you get to talking to one another, get to talking about ex-boyfriends and why you break up with him and I just flat tell them, I had to let him go because of this. A lot of guys sometimes are like, I ain't gonna mess with her, you know what I'm saying, because they probably think like, ya, she's still got it or something.
-Monique

Conclusions

A diagnosis of chlamydia raises substantial psychological, social, and interpersonal concerns among reproductive-age women. Although chlamydia is curable, it is stigmatizing and disrupts trust and confidence within sexual partnerships. Future research will clarify the magnitude and correlates of the psychosocial burden of a chlamydia diagnosis.