

INTRODUCTION

Vaginismus is a fairly common sexual dysfunction, with an estimated prevalence rate of 2-3% of the female population (Jeng, 2003). A survey by Roy (2004) suggests that vaginismus constitutes approximately 24% of all female sexual dysfunctions.

Vaginismus is also suggested as one of the leading causes of unconsummated marriage. Consequently, it is described as one of the most incapacitating sexual disorders (Blazer, 1964; Gindin & Resnicoff, 2002; Jeng, 2003 & Masters & Johnson, 1970).

Vaginismus is defined as the involuntary spasm of the pelvic muscles surrounding the outer third of the vagina (American Psychiatric Association, 1994; Ellison, 1972; Kaplan, 1974 & Masters & Johnson, 1970). In its severest form, penetration of the vagina is virtually impossible. However, there are less pronounced degrees of vaginismus, which allow penetration, but are accompanied by severe burning pain. The condition may also be primary, presenting from the first attempt at penetration. Secondary vaginismus occurs when women are initially able to have sex, but later are unable to be penetrated due to involuntary muscle spasms (Caplan in Jeng, 2003).

Aspects of the definition have been debated in the literature. The DSM-IV specifies that the condition interferes with sexual intercourse, thereby defining the condition in relation to sexual activity (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). However, some theorists suggest that the reflex contraction that characterises vaginismus may be triggered by any imagined or anticipated attempts at penetration of the vagina. These may include attempts to insert tampons or medical pelvic examinations (Jeng, 2003). In addition, the current DSM-IV definition has incorporated another dimension, namely the requirement that the condition must cause significant personal distress for the individual (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

The condition has been associated with many psychological and social variables (Jeng, 2003; Masters & Johnson, 1970; Robinson, 2003 & Silverstein, 1989). The acknowledged contention that vaginismus is a psychogenic disorder has led to investigations into the mental and emotional processes that may affect physical

functioning (Frandsen, Hafen, Karren & Smith, 2002). Nevertheless, the condition is still not well understood. The lack of knowledge regarding the condition indicates the need for further research.

A survey by Reissing (1999) suggests that most of the literature pertaining to vaginismus focuses on the quantitative establishment of etiological factors. Very little research has attempted an in-depth investigation from the sufferer's perspective (Adesso, Fleming & Reddy, 1994). In addition, most of the research pertaining to vaginismus focuses merely on factors relating specifically to vaginismic women. Not much research has attempted to explore the dynamics of their relationships with significant others. This gap in the literature has been identified by Cobain & McCabe (1998). Research which incorporates these aspects may be beneficial for a number of reasons.

This type of exploration may facilitate a better understanding of the psychological and social dimensions of vaginismus. This may assist medical practitioners, who may lack an understanding of their patients (Bohnen, Drogendijk, Erdmann, Hop, Nelemans, Pols, & van Os-Bossagh, 2002; Reiter, 1998). Documenting this information may also assist women sharing this common experience, many of whom feel helpless and isolated (Jeng, 2003).

Such an exploration is particularly relevant in the South African context, considering the scarcity of South African literature pertaining to vaginismus (Robinson, 2003). The governments' current commitment to human rights requires it to promote women's equality of opportunity. This notion should extend to health care, which requires an understanding of female health concerns. This is highlighted by Kruger & Lesch (2004), who advocate the prioritisation of the study of female sexual behaviour in South Africa. These researchers emphasise the limited understanding of female sexuality, as well as the importance of recognising that sexuality and sexual desire are normative aspects of healthy psychological development in females. This study is believed to be significant in this regard.

The proposed study aims to investigate subjective experiences of the condition, how sufferers perceive it originating, and what sense they make of it. In addition, the study aims to explore how women suffering from vaginismus perceive themselves and the significant relationships they have experienced. These relationships include intimate partners as well as current and past relationships with parents.

An inquiry into the subjective, experiential dimensions of vaginismus is believed necessary to enhance understanding of the condition. This incorporates an exploration of the meaning that sufferers attribute to their condition. Given the fact that vaginismus appears to affect women in both a personal and social capacity (Jeng, 2003), these aspects have been focused upon as they represent gaps in the literature. As the condition is a sexual disorder, intimate relationships were considered essential to investigate (Barnes, Doherty & Kennedy, 1995). Early relationships with parental figures are believed to influence the nature of subsequent intimate relationships and sexual experiences (Ahvenainen, Koskenenvuo, Helenius, Ojanlatva, & Rautava, 2003). It is therefore believed necessary to examine women's perceptions of their parental relationships and how these may have impacted on their intimate and sexual experiences. In addition, the possible relationship between parental relationships and the development and experience of vaginismus itself requires examination.

Given the explorative nature of the study, a qualitative methodology has been utilised, more specifically thematic content analysis. This is a commonly accepted qualitative technique used to categorise large volumes of material into more meaningful units which can be interpreted (Henwood, 1996; Holsti, 1969 & Krippendorf, 1980). This methodology was felt to be useful as it facilitated an exploration of subjective experience, without presuming any one theoretical orientation.

The investigation of relationship patterns as well as childhood experiences may suggest a psychoanalytic flavour. However, the study does not attempt to make an argument or situate itself within one particular paradigm or viewpoint. Rather, it attempts to understand the subjective perceptions of women regarding their condition, the meanings they attribute to it, and their significant relationships.

Chapter 1 reviews the literature pertaining to vaginismus. It covers research as well as various theories regarding the etiology of vaginismus. In addition, it explores the experiences of women suffering from vaginismus, focusing on relevant areas and facets of their lives. Literature pertaining to sexual, romantic as well as parental relationships has been included. Chapter 3 details the research methodology of the study, outlining the research aims, research design and procedure, as well as the method of analysis. Chapter 4 comprises the content analysis and discussion of the interview data. Chapter 5 discusses the the limitations of the study and implications for further research.