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### Sexual Activity During Menstruation: A Qualitative Study

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## Sexual Activity During Menstruation: A Qualitative Study

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*This study utilized a grounded theory method to analyze qualitative narratives about sexuality and menstruation from 108 young women (ages 18–23;  $M=19.8$ ,  $SD=1.07$ ) and 12 young men (ages 18–24;  $M=20.4$ ,  $SD=1.46$ ). Five patterns were found: Sixteen women identified themselves as virgins and had not faced the issue of negotiating sex during menstruation. Among the 92 women who said they were sexually active, 37 women said they would never have intercourse during menstruation, eight women said they tried it once but never would again, and seven women said they rarely would and only under certain conditions. The largest group, 40 women, said they do have menstrual sex. Compared to the other groups, more of the women who do have sex during menstruation were in committed relationships, and none espoused a discourse of disgust. Considering the 12 men, three were virgins. Among the nine sexually experienced men, seven said they did have sex with a menstruating partner. Young adults who were comfortable with menstrual sex saw it as just another part of a committed intimate relationship.*

In this study, we examined young adults' descriptions of and their experiences with sexuality during menstruation as a way to analyze the gendered relationship between sexuality and power (Lee, 1994; Risman & Schwartz, 2002; Wood, Koch, & Mansfield, 2006). On the threshold of adulthood, women have experienced the physical and emotional effects of, and internalized the contradictory societal messages about, menstruation and their developing bodies. These messages acknowledge women's sexual and reproductive potential, as well as remind them that they live in a society where women are devalued (Lee, 2008). They now face the challenge of negotiating how to handle having a period in their sexual relationships. In what ways, if any, do women assert agency and empowerment within this complex sexual environment? A feminist perspective allows us to focus dialectically on developmental events and their reconstruction within personal and social contexts as sites of power, control, and agency (Baber, 2000; Diamond, 2006; Lee, 2008).

### The Intersection Between Menstruation and Sexual Relationships

By mid-adolescence, the primary cultural message about menstruation in Western society is that having a period is a necessary inconvenience that women simply must accept (Brownmiller, 1984; Fingerson, 2005; Lee, 1994; Martin, 1996; Roberts, Goldenberg, Power, & Pyszczynski, 2002). Until recently, when more positive portrayals have emerged through the media and parental socialization (Lee, 2008), menstruation has been treated as an unpleasant rite of passage (Fingerson, 2005), or worse, as a dirty, disgusting mess that must be hidden and controlled (Costos, Ackerman, & Paradis, 2002). Menstruation has been referred to as "the curse" or "being on the rag" (Delaney, Lupton, & Toth, 1988; Lee, 1994), and a menstruating woman is routinely called a "bitch," "evil," "smelly," or "fishy" (Cooper & Koch, 2007). In-depth interviews with adult women revealed that menstrual management involves hiding the evidence of leaking or bloody "sanitary" products to avoid shame (Martin, 1987). In qualitative interviews with 138 women aged 26 to 60 years, Costos et al. (2002) found that 64% reported that their mothers gave them negative messages (e.g., "grin and bear it") about menstruation and sexuality, and only 15% reported a positive experience with menstruation during their teenage years. The 17 African American women (aged

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18–50) in Cooper and Koch's (2007) study wanted more explicit communication and accurate information about menstruation from their mothers, teachers, and other women.

Menstruation signifies women's emerging sexual availability and reproductive potential at the same time that it inserts women into the "hierarchical ordering of the sexual" (Lee, 1994, p. 344). As they approach sexual maturity, girls, more than boys, describe the competing images they confront of female bodies as both life-giving *and* contaminated (Lee & Sasser-Coen, 1996; Martin, 1996; Roberts et al., 2002). As girls mature, their sense of sexual subjectivity and potential for establishing agency is more compromised than boys'. Girls' pubertal experiences cause them "to dislike their bodies, objectify their own bodies, and act on (rather than in) their own bodies" (Martin, 1996, p. 15). Young women worry about the sexual double standard: whereas men are rewarded for engaging in sexual behaviors, women may be punished for engaging in the identical behaviors (Milhausen & Herold, 1999). As Risman and Schwartz (2002) observed, the sexual revolution has been integrated more successfully into social relationships than the gender revolution. Girls come of age in a cultural context that simultaneously expects them to become sexual objects and judges them for their sexual availability and their own desire (Tolman, 2002). In her study of 55 adolescent girls and boys, aged 14 to 19, Martin (1996) found that girls lacked the kind of subjective knowledge about their bodies that is practical and rooted in personal experience. They were emotionally ill-prepared for engaging in sexual relationships in which their boyfriends had more access to their bodies than they allowed themselves. From a feminist perspective on young women's sexuality, women are taught to prioritize men's desires and sexual satisfaction and to lose touch with their own bodily feelings and desires (Tolman, 2002).

One aspect of adult sexual intimacy is negotiating sexual activity around a woman's menstrual cycle. The interpersonal dynamics of having sex during menstruation adds another layer of complexity to women's sexual interactions because of mixed to negative perceptions of menstruation. Negotiating sexual decision making is especially complicated for young women who are coming of age given the sexual double standard (Carpenter, 2002). Women often lack the tools to communicate their own needs and desires in the context of a sexual encounter or intimate relationship (Baber, 2000; Gavey & McPhillips, 1999). In their study of 199 undergraduate women, Schooler, Ward, Merriwether, and Caruthers (2005) found that menstrual shame, including the desire to hide their bodies, was associated with women's decreased sexual experience and increased sexual risk taking. This study built on earlier work by Rempel and Baumgartner (2003), who found that unlike women with personal feelings of discomfort or disgust

toward menstruation and sex, the romantically involved women who were more comfortable with menstruation and less sensitive to disgust were also more likely to say they had sex during menstruation.

Far less is known about developmental aspects of men's reactions to menstruation. In a rare study, Fingerson (2005) conducted interviews and focus groups with 26 females and 11 males, aged 13 to 19, to explore how they relied on menstruation as sources of power and agency in social interactions. Both females and males agreed that females were more empowered than males by their superior knowledge about menstruation. Males only had a "half-knowing" from overhearing females' conversations at lunch or picking up clues from television and magazines. Females recognized early on that boys and men are both uncomfortable and uninformed about menstruation, and so they used their first-hand knowledge to manipulate social situations. They teased males about their discomfort and refused to be silenced when males did not want to hear menstrual talk. Of note is that, although dominant social norms around menstruation are largely negative, many females in Fingerson's study constructed their own positive ideas about their menstrual experiences.

According to Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, and Thomson (1998), these hints of female agency seem less common as women become sexually involved with men. Male desires become internalized so that both genders devalue feminine and privilege masculine desire (Thompson, 1995; Tolman, 2002). Recent research, conducted in the United States, however, reveals more equal power dynamics in young adult intimate relationships. In her study of virginity loss among 61 men and women, aged 18 to 35, Carpenter (2002) found that the importance of gender as a determinant of sexual meanings and experiences was diminishing. Harvey, Bird, Galavotti, Duncan, and Greenberg (2002) investigated 112 women's (ages 18–25) perceptions of relational power and sexual decision making around condom use. Contrary to previous reports in the literature that center around power imbalances, the women in Harvey et al.'s study reported more joint decision making in which they and their male partners shared responsibility for reproductive decisions. Thus, although young women still operate in a cultural context of the double standard, recent research does reveal that the situation around interpersonal power dynamics in sexual relationships is more complex than previously thought.

Knowledge about adolescent sexuality mostly comes from quantitative studies about risky behaviors (e.g., unintended pregnancy, HIV, and other sexually transmitted infections; Baber, 2000; Schooler et al., 2005). How young adults perceive and experience the intersection between menstruation and sexual intimacy is an area that few researchers have examined in a systematic way. Several researchers (Carpenter, 2002; Christopher

& Sprecher, 2000; Russell, 2005) have observed that qualitative studies of sexual experience are needed to provide rich insights in young people's own words about the subjective aspects of sexuality and power.

This study was guided, then, by two research questions: (a) How do young adults perceive the experience of sexual activity during menstruation? (b) How do women think about and act on their menstrual experience in their sexual relationships?

## Method

### Participants

The data for this study consisted of 120 first-person narratives obtained from undergraduate students enrolled in a human sexuality course at a public university. Students were asked to identify themselves by gender and age. The average age of young women in the sample was 19.8 years ( $SD = 1.07$ ; range = 18–23). The average age of young men was 20.4 years ( $SD = 1.46$ ; range = 18–24). Many more women (108) than men (12) participated in the study. We include the male narratives for comparison purposes because men have rarely been asked to contribute their views on the topic of menstruation (Fingerson, 2005).

Although students were not asked to identify other sociodemographic characteristics, some chose to identify themselves in ways beyond their gender or age. One female student indicated she was lesbian by stating, "I have engaged in sexual activity with my partner while she was menstruating." Another female student referred to her nationality: "I am Indian so naturally, my family is more conservative . . . and I never had to participate in any awkward conversations." Several students indicated they had attended Catholic school, in the context of discussing their sex education experiences. Additional references to race, sexual orientation, nationality, and religion were not forthcoming, revealing ways in which the data are limited. Enrollment patterns in the class, however, reflected general university enrollment. Seventy percent of the student body was from the mid-Atlantic region, with two-thirds from suburban areas and one-third from rural areas. Regarding self-identification of race or ethnicity, 72% were White, 7% were Asian, 4% were African American, 2% were Hispanic, 2% were international, less than 1% were Native American, and 12% were unknown.

### Procedure

The 120 narratives were gathered from students in three classes taught by the first author (enrolling an average of 160 students per semester), over a three-year duration. Permission to conduct this research was granted by the university institutional review board.

The goal of the course was to explore the diversity of human sexuality using global perspectives from interdisciplinary sources including biological, historical, developmental, psychological, and sociological approaches. All students were invited to complete an extra credit assignment, with the purpose of offering students a forum to expand on a class topic.

Students were given a choice as to whether to submit a voluntary extra credit paper from which these data are drawn; if they did, their views and values would not be graded. The requirements were to submit a one-page, single-spaced, personal narrative reflecting on their choice of topic; narratives were, on average, 650 words. Students could choose one of several questions to answer. They were asked to write in the first person and draw from their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences in relation to the topic and course content.

In the first two years, students could choose from one of four topics: (a) the relationship of spirituality and sexuality, (b) the development of gender identity in childhood, (c) limitations to emotional intimacy in relationships, and (d) experiences with menstruation. In the third year, a fifth topic was added to the list of choices: (e) ways to distinguish a romantic from a sexual relationship. The menstruation question, which is used in our analysis, was worded as follows:

What were you told about menstruation? From whom? How old were you? Do you engage in sexual activity while a woman is menstruating? How do you feel about it? How do you talk about menstruation today? What do you say? If you are a woman, do you experience PMS [premenstrual syndrome] or cramps, and what do you do to relieve cramps? (Male and female students can answer this question).

Of note is that the menstruation question was worded in a way to encourage all students, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, to respond and to interpret the phrase "sexual activity" in their own way.

After the narratives were collected, a research assistant sorted the papers by topic and gender, then removed all identifying information before distributing the menstruation narratives to us. In the first year, 89 students in a class of 153 (58%) chose to write a narrative. Of the 89 students, 49 (one man and 48 women; 55%) wrote a menstruation narrative. In the second year, 93 of 162 (57%) enrolled students chose to write a narrative. Of the 93 students, 38 (two men and 36 women; 41%) wrote menstruation narratives. In the third year, 129 of 162 (80%) enrolled students wrote a narrative. Of these 129 students, 43 (9 men and 34 women; 33%) wrote menstruation narratives. Although 130 narratives were collected, 10 female narratives were dropped from the analysis because these 10 women did not address the sexuality portion of the question.

## Data Analysis

We conducted a grounded theory analysis of the 120 narratives using the constant comparative method to identify general patterns and specific themes and to make analytic distinctions in the data at each level of analytic work (Charmaz, 2006; Glazer & Strauss, 1967). In the initial stage, open coding, we independently read the narratives multiple times, attending to participants' language and meaning as expressed in words, sentences, paragraphs, and the sense of the narrative as a whole (Charmaz, 2006). In each iteration, we took detailed notes and wrote analytic memos on the students' knowledge about menstruation; their reports of whether they would or do have sex during menstruation; how they talk about menstruation with others; and for women's narratives, what the physical experience of menstruation is like. After our independent coding, we discussed each case, sharing our meaning and the themes, categories, and subcodes that were emerging in and across cases. We discussed all of the cases, and then returned to cases in which we had disagreements, after we had further refined the coding scheme, until 100% agreement was reached.

In the next phase of the coding process, axial coding, we conducted a more intense analysis of each major emergent category (e.g., whether a woman was sexually experienced, engaged in sexual intercourse, or a virgin) and subcodes (e.g., for those who were sexually active, whether she would have sex during menstruation, would not, would never again, would but only under certain conditions). The axial coding process, in which we returned over and over again to the data, generated four key dimensions, each with descriptive properties. The four dimensions were as follows: (a) sexual experience history, (b) perceptions of having sex during menstruation, (c) perceptions of partnership status, and (d) discourses (disgust, messy, okay). We continually compared notes throughout this process and discussed each code generated until we settled on a final coding scheme, further refining it through constant comparison and reflective analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Again, we discussed coding disagreements in the context of a student's entire narrative and across narratives until we reached 100% consensus, settling on a final coding scheme in which we brought the data back together into a coherent whole (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

In the third phase of the grounded theory process, selective coding, we determined the main story underlying the analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The culmination of the data analysis reveals that *having sex during menstruation* is part of a developmental process that begins in girlhood with cultural messages about menstruation. As women enter adulthood and become sexually active, they face the challenge of negotiating sexual relationships while menstruating. Women who become comfortable with menstrual sex tend to see it as just another part of a committed sexual relationship.

## Results

In this study, five groups were identified as to whether participants do or do not engage in sex during menstruation: (a) those who were *virgins* (16 women and 3 men); (b) those who were sexually experienced but would *never have sex during menstruation* (37 women and 2 men); (c) those who had tried sex while menstruating but would *never do it again* (eight women and two men); (d) those who *rarely* had sex during menstruation, and did so with restrictions (seven women and one man); and (e) those who *do have sex* during menstruation (40 women and 4 men). After presenting the women's perceptions, we include the men's perceptions, although exploratory, because of the lack of information in the literature about men's experiences of sexual activity during menstruation.

### Sexually Inexperienced Women: I Am a Virgin

Sixteen women (15% of the sample) stated in their narratives that they were virgins or that they did not engage in any sexual activity. Eleven of the 16 women who were virgins rejected sex on their periods because, lacking sexual experience (and experience negotiating menstrual sex specifically), they could only imagine the idea of "bloody sex" as gross. Geri explained<sup>1</sup>:

I do not engage in sexual activity, but if I did, I would have to say NO! That is so gross!!! The thought of having my period blood on some guy's penis makes me want to throw up. People do that? Guys aren't completely grossed out? I still get grossed out when I have to change an overnight pad. Just the thought of it makes me feel uncomfortable. When I am on my period I don't even want to be around a guy. A lot of the reason is because when I am on my period I smell this awful odor that never goes away no matter how many showers you take and bottles of Victoria's Secret body spray you put on. I would hate for a guy to think I smell like that. Is there is a pill to get rid of the smell?

The other five sexually inexperienced women said that, although they did not have sex, they might or might not be open to menstrual sex in the future. These women did not foreclose the possibility of menstrual sex once they became sexually active, noting that "I might change my mind," or "I won't know until I get there":

My friends have talked about whether or not they have had sex on their periods. Being a virgin I can't really contribute to that conversation. My opinion on sex on your period is that if both parties are comfortable and okay with it, then what's the problem. . . . I guess I won't know until my future husband and I talk about the idea. (Judith)

<sup>1</sup>The names of participants are pseudonyms.

Among these five, three women used words like “disgust” or “dirty” to describe how they felt about menstrual sex:

I think that it could be ok as long as you are not at the heaviest period in your menstruation. Other people find it is down right dirty and sex can wait until that time is over. I think I agree with that concept more, I guess for myself. (Luisa)

### Sexually Experienced Women

The majority of the women in the sample ( $n=92$ ; 85%) acknowledged that they had been or were having sexual intercourse. Four distinct groups of sexually active women emerged: those who would not have sex during menstruation ( $n=37$ ; 34%), those who said they had before but would never do it again ( $n=8$ ; 7%), those who would do it but rarely and only under certain conditions ( $n=7$ ; 7%), and those who do have sex during menstruation ( $n=40$ ; 37%).

### No Way: Bloody Sex is Not Sexy

The women who said *no way* to menstrual sex explained that they did not have sex during menstruation primarily because they perceived this act as too “gross.” Other words used to describe sex during menstruation were *disgusting*, *unhygienic*, *smelly*, *bloody*, *awkward*, *painful*, and *messy*. Nearly all women (87%) in the *no way* group used this discourse of disgust as their reason for not having sex: “Personally, I find the idea of bloody sex kind of disgusting. If I were fooling around and saw blood, I would feel extremely humiliated” (Leigh). Feeling embarrassed about one’s body while bleeding was a common association expressed by these women, especially in relation to how men (might) react:

The one area I still have trouble with is sex on my period and how guys react. I do feel like women are condemned for having their period and at times I have felt ashamed because I felt like it was my fault we couldn’t have sex. I think this mainly comes from culture and I do feel that most men (and women) consider women unclean when they are menstruating. (Alana)

Before I ever had sex I had made the decision that I never would if I was menstruating. I have maintained that rule, and will follow it until the day I die. To me, having sex while menstruating is dirty and makes me sick to think about it. When I am on my period, I already feel unclean, so why would I allow someone else to explore that area of my body and make me feel even filthier? I can’t imagine allowing someone to [do that]. (Alyson)

These women saw themselves as vulnerable, particularly if they did not have a steady boyfriend. Indeed, only 30% ( $n=11$ ) of the 37 women who said *no way* mentioned having a boyfriend, compared to 83% of the 40 women who said *yes, I do it*. In considering menstrual sex, most of the *no way* women were not imagining this event in the context of an actual relationship, but were probably imagining how it would play out in the context of a “random hookup” or casual dating relationship. The *no way* women wanted to protect themselves from being judged or shamed by a man for having sex while menstruating. Sheri said:

Another reason I don’t like having my period is because I will not hook up with a guy. I think it’s gross. Also, I think that it makes a woman more vulnerable. In my experience, guys cannot even handle the word *period* let alone having sex with a girl when they are on it. I think a guy would look at me differently if we had sex during my period.

Physical pain and discomfort also detracted from sexual desire for 18 (49%) of the 37 women in the *no way* group. As Chelsea explained, “I have never engaged in any sexual activity outside of kissing when I am menstruating. This is solely a personal choice. I don’t feel particularly attractive when bloated, fatigued, and crabby, but that’s me!” Similarly, Amanda said, “When I am on my period, I feel as though my body needs and deserves a rest from sexual activity. I also feel as though my vulva is overly sensitive and stimulation is not something I desire.”

### I’ve Tried It before, But Never Again

Eight of the sexually experienced women said that they had had sex while on their period, typically just once, but they no longer did it. Seven of these women used a discourse of disgust, from discomfort to dire consequences, to describe the experience:

I have engaged in oral sex for a man while menstruating. I have also engaged in vaginal intercourse. It was not a very pleasant experience and both of us felt very uncomfortable. We decided as a couple that that would not be done again. (Lindsay)

Similarly, Jessica stated, “I do not engage in sexual activity while I am menstruating. I tried it and it was just too physically uncomfortable for me. Also I felt so self-conscious that I didn’t enjoy it very much.” Brianne described a more serious consequence for her:

Now I do not engage in sexual activity during menstruation. It’s just very messy and unsanitary. I did try it once, but I’d like to say that I was stupid at that time. The guy I was dating said that he wanted to try to have sex without a condom on, and since I was on my period, it would be all

right since the egg and uterine wall were sloughing off. It sounded very logical to me at the time, until I went to a doctor and asked them about it. The doctor told me that I could still get pregnant and that having sex while menstruating was a breeding ground for germs. I ended up taking a morning-after pill. After that unpleasant experience, I never had sex while on my period again.

In all eight cases, women offered an explanation of why they would *never again* engage in sexual activity while menstruating. Seven women stopped for their own reasons, as noted earlier: fear of getting pregnant, physical discomfort, and disgust. They located their decision in their own personal lack of comfort with menstrual sex. Only one woman said that she would have been comfortable continuing to engage in menstrual sex, but she stopped because of her boyfriend:

I don't engage in sexual activity while I am menstruating because my boyfriend freaks out if he sees the blood. It wouldn't bother me at all, but we don't engage in it because of the one time I did convince him. He saw blood all over his little man and his little man was no longer happy after that. Ha ha. So I can't convince him anymore. (Elly)

### Rarely, With Restrictions

Seven women were willing to have sex during menstruation, but only rarely, and under certain conditions. All of these women said it was dirty, nasty, or gross. Women in the *rarely* group were willing to have menstrual sex under one or more of the following conditions: (a) if it is in the context of the man's desire ( $n=3$ ); (b) if their period is light, as on the first or last day ( $n=4$ ); or (c) if the woman has a strong desire for sex, as attributed to her hormones ( $n=3$ ). Consider the following two examples:

Sex during menstruation, yeah, it is definitely not the greatest but I have done it. Of course only when it is close to the end so it's not nasty but you can only last for so long without sex as a young female with hormones. (Jenn)

I personally think it is somewhat gross, and given the choice I try to avoid any sexual activity while I am menstruating. I know that most of my friends are the same way. This isn't to say that there hasn't been a time or two when we have been convinced by the guy we are with to do it. Though afterwards, I personally felt sort of dirty. (Teresa)

### Yes, I Do It (I Have Sex While Menstruating)

The largest group in the sample ( $n=40$ ; 37%) said that they did engage in sexual activity while menstruating. Several features stand out among the women in this

group, with regard to why they were comfortable engaging in menstrual sex.

*I have a boyfriend.* First, women in the *yes, I do it* group were far more likely ( $n=33$ ; 83%) to say they had a boyfriend (or, in one case, a girlfriend) than in any other group. Only one of the women in the *sexually inexperienced* group mentioned having a boyfriend (i.e., "the guy I am dating" [Ursula]). In the *sexually experienced* group, 11 of the 37 *no way* women (30%) said they had a boyfriend, five of the seven women in the *never again* group (71%) said they had an intimate partner, and four of the eight women in the *rarely* group (50%) did. In contrast, the majority (33 out of 40; 83%) of the *yes, I do it* women noted that they had an intimate partner (32 with boyfriends; one with a girlfriend). These women emphasized that they were having menstrual sex, a normal part of life, with an intimate partner in the context of a committed relationship. Erin is representative of the 83% of the *yes, I do it* women who linked their comfort level with menstrual sex to the fact that she had a steady boyfriend:

I do engage in sexual activity on my period. I have had the same boyfriend for 5 years. We started dating in high school and engaged in sexual activity within a year of dating. With him being older I expected to experience pressure with the sexual part of our relationship, but I didn't. He let me decide when I was ready and I consider myself very lucky. But we are very comfortable with each other and it doesn't bother us whatsoever. It's a natural bodily function.

Having menstrual sex, to these women, was an indication that a woman and a man are mature enough to negotiate about the physical, emotional, and sexual intimacy associated with such a delicate activity:

My boyfriend and I have talked a lot about if we should just take a break from doing sexual things when I am on my period, but we decided that we are both comfortable enough with each other that we understand that it is a natural and healthy part of life, and that we are mature enough to make the decision. (Patti)

Courtney distinguished being in a committed relationship from a casual college hookup:

Now that I'm all grown up and in college, I'm engaged to a wonderful guy, and yes, we do engage in sexual intercourse. It is very hard to have time with each other with our busy schedules, so when we can have sex we do. Sometimes we do have sex when I am on my period. It is not pretty, but that's just the way it is. I think when you really love someone, things like that shouldn't matter. We are not just a college hook-up or short term relationship with someone you met at a party or a bar.

Notably, over one half of the women ( $n = 25$ ; 61%) in the *yes, I do it* group endorsed the idea that, to accommodate menstrual sex into their relationships, they needed to focus on the housekeeping task of ensuring that the messiness was controlled. These women noted the importance of first ensuring that their partners were okay with the act before they engaged in it. Thus, to these women, sex on your period was acceptable, as long as it was relatively clean, and your partner gave his approval. Faith, like most of these women, ensured that she took a shower first and put a towel on the bed. Shirley explained:

I have engaged in sexual activity while on my period. I don't think it's a big deal; it's mostly the guy's decision. I've only been sexually active with my current boyfriend, and he has never had a problem with it except that it requires more clean up.

Unlike the women in the *rarely* group who focused their narratives on describing the restrictions they put on the circumstances under which they would have sex, the women in the *yes, I do it* group were more relaxed about the housekeeping tasks associated with menstrual sex. Perhaps the security of a committed relationship encouraged their comfort level, as Beth indicated:

My boyfriend and I are very open with our sexuality and we feel comfortable engaging in sexual activity while I'm on my period. We take precautions and many times we choose to do it in places with an easy cleanup, such as a shower.

Ava concurred that time in a relationship mattered, stating that, "After I'm with someone for a while, I feel more comfortable making a mess of us if he's ready to handle it."

*I don't think it's gross.* Second, compared to other sexually experienced women, those who said that they do have sex on their period were least likely to use any kind of messy or disgust language. Fewer (75%) of the *yes, I do it* group, compared to 86% of the *no way* group, 88% of the *never again* group, and 100% of the *rarely* group, used negative words. Among the *yes, I do it* women, two types of discourses were used: the 25% of *yes, I do it* women who did not use any negative language at all, and another 14 women (35%) who just described the messiness of menstrual sex in a neutral, practical, and matter-of-fact way:

I am not bothered by menstruation and sexual activity at all. At first I wasn't sure if my boyfriend would be okay with it, but come on, sex is sex. Mind you, we have been together for over 4 years and are completely comfortable with each other in general. I suppose the way we see it, as long as you put down a towel, making it easy to clean up, no harm done. Ever since I have started taking

oral contraceptives, the actual period is hardly any menses at all, making sexual activity even less of a worry. (Marina)

Thus, unlike the women in the *rarely* group, who indicated the need to impose "restrictions" on their "bloody bodies" to make menstrual sex bearable, these women described a social context of becoming adept at dealing with some mess by simply taking precautions to ensure cleanliness.

The remaining 16 women in the *yes, I do it* group (40%) said they used to think menstrual sex was gross, but described a progression in their perception of it as "gross" to "just messy, but okay." Their experience changed with time in a comfortable sexual relationship, as Rachel suggested:

As far as engaging in sexual intercourse while menstruating, I am fairly comfortable with it. I used to think it was very wrong and I was really grossed out by it. Now that I'm older and in a long-term monogamous relationship, it isn't as much of a big deal. It can be a little bit of a mess but other than that nothing really bothers me about it.

Ila agreed:

Sex during menstruation is not so bad. I admit that when I first started having sex I never would have considered it. Part of my comfort with it stems from the fact that I had been with the same boyfriend for several years, and he was comfortable with it, so why shouldn't I be? If the guy isn't bothered by it, you can plug it up, avoid the mess, and have oral sex! If you don't mind dealing with the mess, it's extra lubricated and you don't have to worry with KY [K-Y<sup>®</sup> jelly]!

*I like getting my sexual needs met.* Finally, more than one half of the *yes, I do it* women ( $n = 21$ ; 53%) espoused self-oriented reasons for having menstrual sex. Eleven of these 21 women espoused a pleasure narrative, citing their belief that "women seem to want to engage in sex more while they are on their period; we just seem to want it more." These women used a hormonal account to explain their passions and urges to have menstrual sex:

When I have my period I sometimes engage in sexual activity with my boyfriend of 2 years. I think we are so comfortable with each other that we feel fine doing this. He was a little apprehensive about doing it at first but I seemed to convince him that it wasn't a big deal. I don't think that it is. We have sex toward the end of my period when it is light. I do not have a problem having sex on my period, and sometimes I enjoy it. I know this is because of the varying hormone levels. (Joyce)

By attributing sex during menstruation to a hormonal urge, these women are attempting to construct a space for their own desire. They perceived themselves as acting on their own urges when they have menstrual sex, as opposed to responding to a partner's desire or to any other external circumstances or ideas:

I find that my libido is quite high when I am on my period, so I enjoy having sex when I am on it. The majority of men I have been with have no problems with the bleeding. There have been a select few who find it gross, but I did not last long with them anyway because they tended to be uptight about sex. Men who do not like sex on the rag tend to be less caring and less fun in bed. (Jade)

These women suggested that having sexual intercourse during menstruation satisfied their "urges:"

As I became older and became sexually active, I noticed how "convenient" it was for me to be so desperately horny during my menstrual cycle. I honestly thought something was physically, maybe even mentally wrong with me. Until I met my current boyfriend I refrained from acting on the "urge" during that time of the month. It was some of the best sex I have had—ever. (Carla)

Another explanation for why it feels good to have menstrual sex centered on bodily functions. Seven of these 21 *yes, I do it* women noted that menstruation, as a natural body function, provided an extra lubrication that enhanced sexual pleasure. A woman with a female partner said they engaged in sex during their periods as a way to ease menstrual cramps:

I was a bit uneasy at first, but my partner said that the friction from penetration and orgasms helped ease her cramps, so I decided to try it. I found that it did help, and besides a little extra preparation in terms of cleanliness, it wasn't much different from sex any other time. (Eva)

Finally, three of these 21 women described how menstrual sex was good for them because it was a very intimate way for their partners to show their love and care:

When I'm on my period, the sex is different—he babies me when we're making love. He knows that I feel more self-conscious, and he works even harder to make me feel beautiful and sexy. Both of us enjoy having sex when I'm on my period, because it's just better! We're more likely to "make love" than just "have sex." There is a difference. I feel that being able to have sex when I'm on my period is just another thing that shows how close we are to each other. (Kerri)

### Men's Perspectives on Menstrual Sex

The men's perspectives about menstrual sex correspond to the women's. Of note is that all of the nine

sexually experienced men and none of the three sexually inexperienced men mentioned that they had girlfriends.

Two of the inexperienced men said they would not have menstrual sex because it was nasty, as Ben noted:

I would never engage in sexual activity with a woman who was menstruating. I was always taught that a woman was unclean during this time. I have heard my friends talk about putting a towel under the girl and then engaging in sex. This seemed so unnatural and just plain nasty to me. I cringe when I even think about it.

The third inexperienced man, Steve, said he did not think he would because he felt like it "would be painful/awkward for her," but noted that it would also depend on what they both felt comfortable doing.

Among the nine sexually experienced men, two men said they would not have sex with a menstruating woman. They confirmed the shame that women who have sex while menstruating do (or should) experience, upholding contradictory notions of women as either "bad" or "good." Rashad condemned any woman who cannot wait for sex until her period is over:

I believe that it is nasty to engage in sex while a girl is on her period. If a person cannot wait for five days then I believe that they have a problem. I find that odor alone is enough to deter me from having sex with someone that is on their period. I don't think I could bring a girl like that home to my mother! Just think; if she let me do it, who else has?

Among the remaining seven sexually experienced men who did have menstrual sex, two had tried it once, but would not do it again. Andrew said it made too many dirty towels, and Walter said it was not a pleasant experience for his girlfriend. Kyle said that he did it out of necessity, thus rarely, and with restrictions:

For the past 3 years I have been in a long distance relationship, sexually active for the past 2 years, and it seems like every other time we are able to see each other she is menstruating. Sometimes when she is near the very beginning or almost done we have engaged in sex. It is not my favorite thing to do but having a healthy sexual relationship is more important than being afraid of a menstruating woman, especially since we are only able to see each other two to three times a month.

Finally, four of the men were in a serious relationship with a woman and currently had no problem with menstrual sex. Two men used to find it gross, but now they were okay with it. For example, Jared noted that being able to handle a menstruating woman was a sign of his maturation and love:

In my early teens I thought menstruation was sickening, but as I got older and my sexual activity increased,

I grew out of that. I engage in sexual activity with my fiancée during menstruation. I'm not sick or a freak. At first she was a bit hesitant, but once we began, we forgot all about her period. I love my fiancée to an extent where it doesn't bother me.

For the men who never had a problem with menstrual sex, being in a serious relationship reinforced the idea of mutual comfort and trust as important components of or prerequisites to decision making about menstrual sex:

When I began my first serious relationship, my girlfriend would not want to have sex when she was menstruating. After we had been together for a long time she eventually quit worrying about it. I believe she was embarrassed and had to get more comfortable with me. I was never bothered at any time in the relationship by her menstruating. Once we started having sex on her period we never looked back. (Daniel)

### Discussion

This study on the relatively unexplored topic of menstruation and sexual activity for young adults sheds new light on the social construction of gender and sexuality. The narratives allow for the examination of menstrual sex, a topic that is rarely acknowledged at the societal level but is personally deliberated and negotiated at the individual level. As girls transition from childhood to adolescence and young adulthood, they confront contradictory cultural messages that position them as sexual agents with the power to experience sexual pleasure and give life, but also as female bodies that are typically defined during menstruation as messy, dirty, smelly, and even gross (Cooper & Koch, 2007; Costos et al., 2002; Lee, 1994; Martin, 1996). These contradictory messages can be found in the stories of the young adults in this study.

A majority of the women in this study situated their commentary about menstruation and sexuality within a discourse of menstrual sex as either gross or merely messy and thus something they can (easily) manage. Women with more sexual experience, especially women who described having steady boyfriends or being in committed relationships, did not use the language of disgust. Instead, they simply acknowledged that the messiness during menstrual sex was just a part of dealing with a mature sexual relationship. Accepting the messiness is part of a developmental progression for women who come to have sex during menstruation. Many of the sexually experienced women acknowledged that they used to think menstrual sex was gross, but expressed that now they see it as another part of being in a committed partnership. To these women, menstrual sex was something that could be negotiated. With some

creativity and clean-up, it was possible, even enjoyable, to have sex during menstruation. The young women in our sample portrayed menstrual sex as a developmental, relational milestone that tends to become normalized when one is in a committed relationship. The sexually experienced men, as well, normalized sex during a woman's period as just another part of mature sexuality.

At the same time, as others have found (e.g., Carpenter, 2002; Diamond, 2006; Fingerson, 2005; Harvey et al., 2002; Risman & Schwartz, 2002), young women's negotiations around sexual activity are increasingly complex, particularly as they navigate mixed messages about gender and sexual empowerment. Having sex to please their partners or having sex to satisfy their own desires is an ongoing dialectic. Understanding the ways in which the women in this study saw themselves as exercising sexual agency reflects the growing complexity of the gender and sexual dialectic.

Most of the women in this study expressed a desire to be good sexual partners and housekeepers. They appeared to be adding a new type of caring labor to the work expected of them in intimate relationships. Having sex while menstruating involves emotional, mental, and body management before, during, and after sexual activity. Managing their menstrual blood and its clean-up during sexual activity so that he (or she) will not have to see it is a form of *invisible* psychological and physical labor that women take on in their relationships. In other research, it has been found that women are responsible for feeding, soothing, and cleaning up, among countless other (invisible) tasks of everyday living (DeVault, 1991; Dressel & Clark, 1990). Wood et al. (2006) reported that some women define their willingness to participate in sex as sexual desire; thus, their willingness to have sex is driven more by intimacy than by their own desire. Following Wood et al. (2006), a desire for closeness, rather than a feeling of being "turned on," may be connected to the willingness to have sex during menstruation.

Still, other women described the desire to satisfy their own urges as a reason they had sex during menstruation. These women espoused their right to seek sexual satisfaction during the menstrual phase of their cycle, due to the role of hormones, libido, and one's own desire. Although there is no conclusive evidence about the precise role that hormones play in determining women's sexual desire (Wood et al., 2006), or that a single rhythmic pattern characterizes women's sexual desire in connection to their menstrual cycle (Regan, 1996), some women in this study chose an agentic explanation to account for their right to sex during menstruation. Perhaps as young women come of age in the 21st century without the negative "cultural baggage associated with menarche" (Lee, 2008, p. 1326) from the past, agentic women's sexual scripts will proliferate.

These findings suggest the importance of both the developmental and relational context in which sexual decisions are made. Despite the dominance of traditional gender scripts in women's sexual decision making (Baber, 2000; Martin, 1996; Schooler et al., 2005; Tolman & Diamond, 2001), these data add credence to examining sexual agency in unexplored areas to uncover new ideas about women's sexual choices. These findings emphasize the complex nature of young adults' perspectives about their sexuality and their ability to act *in* rather than *on* their bodies (Fine, 1988; Fingerson, 2005; Lee, 1994; Martin, 1996; Roberts et al., 2002). Menstruation, although messy, may increasingly be perceived as one way for women to exercise power through the experience of sexual activity (see Rempel & Baumgartner, 2003). Although most women in relationships ceded some control to men, agreeing to engage in sex for their partners within the context of a mature sexual relationship, a few did claim that power overtly for themselves. These women were willing to commit themselves to perceiving their bodies as sources of sexual pleasure and intimate connection during a time in which they are biologically and socially most associated with being a woman.

We acknowledge several limitations of this study. The narratives were written in a college-level human sexuality class, limiting the scope of their representativeness. The sample is restricted by the lack of demographic information, beyond gender and age, asked of participants. The disproportionate number of female respondents (108) compared to male respondents (12) limits our ability to make gender comparisons. More attention to race, class, and sexual orientation diversity, in contexts outside of the college environment, would provide deeper ways to examine issues associated with menstrual sexuality. For example, it is possible that greater inclusion of lesbian and bisexual women would identify more examples of female sexual agency (e.g., Carpenter, 2002; Diamond, 2006; Martin, 1996; Thompson, 1995). Not asking participants to provide systematic information about their relationship status also limits interpretation. Students' motivation for choosing the menstruation topic for their extra credit narrative is also unknown. Did students choose to write about menstruation because they were particularly comfortable or uncomfortable with this topic?

Taken together, these data show how young women are working through their experiences and concerns about sexuality in the context of one of the most definitive ways they are defined as a woman. Male peers echo women's perceptions. Having sex during menstruation is a marker of adulthood, one in which women can assert control in their sexual relationships, whether by rejecting, postponing, restricting, relinquishing the decision to their partners, or acting on behalf of their own desires.

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